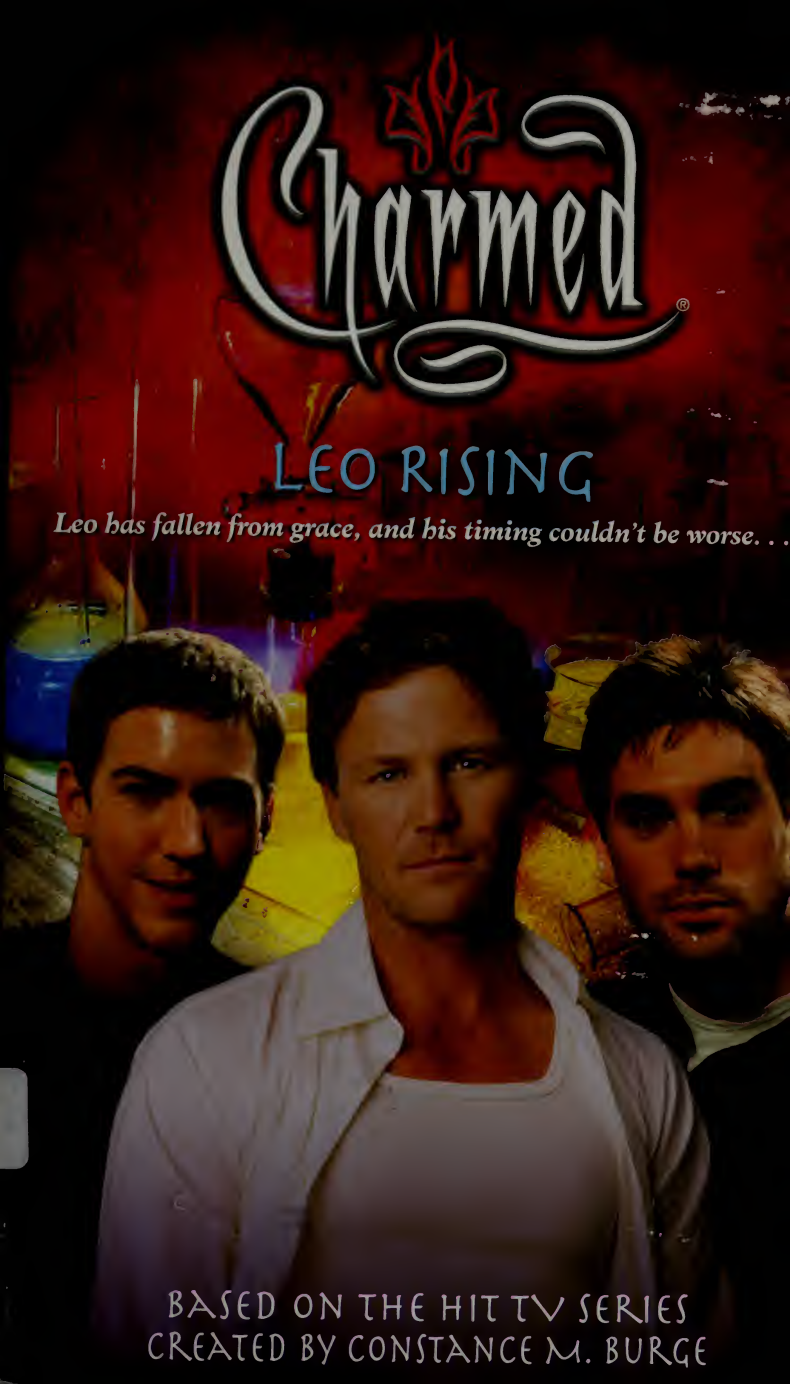
Charmed
LEO RISING
Leo has fallen from grace, and his timing couldn't be worse. . .
BASED ON THE HIT TV SERIES
CREATED BY CONSTANCE M. BURGE

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"What is it you want me to do?"

Inspector Darryl Morris asked as he surveyed the damage to Halliwell Manor. As far as Leo was concerned, it didn't look any better in the light of day than it had the night before. Leo had scoured the house for clues to what had happened in his absence, but he hadn't yet bothered to clean anything up beyond covering the hole in the kitchen floor. There would be time for cleaning when everyone was back home.

The Chinese food was still sitting out in the kitchen. The boys had been fed their breakfast, but that was the only thing Leo had done that wasn't directly tied to his search since he had returned home the night before. He ignored the noises from his stomach. Food wasn't important at the moment. Only one thing mattered to him.

"I want you to find my family."

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LEO RISING

LEO RISING

An original novel by Paul Ruditis

Based on the hit TV series created by

Constance M. Burge

SIMON SPOTLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

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For Harley and Shannon

LEO RISING

Chapter 1

The roast turkey flew through the air, hitting the apex of its arc just beneath the chandelier, and landing with a splat against the dining room wall. A trail of gravy dripped down the wall as the bird slid to the floor.

"And here I thought turkeys couldn't fly," Paige said, looking at the remains. "So much for dinner."

"Somebody's going to pay for that," Piper said, looking to her sister for assistance. The attack at dinnertime was rude enough. There was no need to ruin the meal as well. That was just bad manners.

Paige held out her hand. "Carving knife!" The knife disappeared from the table and a collection of blue-white orbs gathered above her palm, dropping the utensil into her grasp. She pumped her arm and threw the weapon across the room, where it landed, embedded in the chest of a demon. He barely had the chance to

look down at the wound before he exploded in a fiery ball.

Piper silently noted that Paige's accuracy had improved greatly over the past few years. Knife throwing wasn't a talent she had possessed in her life before finding out she was a witch. It was actually rather sad to see the kinds of skills she and her sisters had begun to excel at since they found out they had magical powers and a higher calling.

One demon down. One dozen to go, Piper thought.

Piper and Paige were backed up to the kitchen door. The crashing sounds coming from behind them at least meant that Phoebe was still alive. Once they finished up in the dining room, they'd have to join her. Until then, Phoebe was on her own.

Two of the demons approached the dining room table. Piper still didn't know where they had come from or what they wanted, but now was not the time to ask. She threw up her hands, and the nearest demon exploded. The one who had been beside him grabbed for the serving platter.

"Not the good china," Piper said, making him explode before he could touch it. While she was distracted, a third demon circled around from the conservatory and threw Wyatt's toy truck at her. Piper barely had time to register what was happening before it connected with her head, disorienting her.

"Piper!" Paige cried. She focused on the table.

"Silverware!" With a wave in the demon's direction, she sent every utensil on the table into the demon. It was a particularly messy attack, but it got the job done. The demon exploded, sending all the silverware clanking to the floor. Paige cringed over the damage to the silver and the scuff on the floor. "Whoops."

As more and more demons continued to approach from both entrances into the room, Paige took a moment to check on Piper. She was still conscious. "You okay?"

"I think," Piper said, clearing the cobwebs from her head. She stood, taking in the situation. Six angry demons were coming at them, three from the living room and three from the conservatory. Piper and Paige were incredibly outnumbered, with more demons in the kitchen with Phoebe. All of that was typical for a day in the life of the Charmed Ones. It was the demon who was standing back from the fight that concerned Piper the most. He was in the living room holding a video camera and taping the battle. That part *really* concerned her. It meant something was going on beyond the typical random demons coming to kill the Charmed Ones.

A crash from the kitchen pulled Piper back into the moment. She worried for Phoebe, but there was nothing she could do until she took care of these demons. *Hold on, Phoebe,* she thought. *We're doing the best that we can.*

• • •

Well, dessert's ruined, Phoebe thought as she picked a piece of chocolate cake off her blouse. She had managed to salvage most of her outfit by ducking behind the center island in the kitchen when the demon threw the serving dish at her. Pieces of glass and cake littered the floor behind her, but she was mostly unscathed. Still, she was in no rush to get up off the floor.

Phoebe had been reaching for the herb cabinet when the demon decided to make dessert into a projectile. She had just managed to vanquish his friend with half the contents of the knife drawer, but now she was stuck hiding.

Conveniently, the cake's impact had caused several containers to drop to the floor around her. She salvaged what she could reach while still keeping the island between herself and the remaining trio of demons. So long as they couldn't see her, they didn't know what she was doing.

"Come out and let's finish this," one of the demons said.

Phoebe chose not to answer him. Engaging him in banter might encourage him and his friends. Besides, she was too busy measuring out herbs for the potion she was re-creating from memory. The demons seemed fairly lower level. Their power was more in their number than their abilities. Most of their attack was relegated to throwing objects instead of power balls or

lightning bolts. Still, Phoebe wasn't ready to test her theory unarmed.

If only she had been in the attic when the attack began. That was where the Charmed Ones kept some of the more powerful potion ingredients. Still, a lot of their mixing was done in the kitchen, and Phoebe had a considerable arsenal at her disposal. Ingredients for the basic potion she was creating was mostly composed of the generic stock kept in the front of the cabinet. She had to improvise a few items, but the mixture was easy enough, except for the one missing ingredient key to the concoction: vanilla.

Being that this was first and foremost a kitchen, the vanilla was kept with the baking supplies and separate from the predominantly magical herbs. Paige had often suggested reorganizing the contents of the cabinets, but the kitchen was Piper's domain. Besides, they rarely used vanilla in anything other than Piper's soufflés. Unfortunately, right now it was the key ingredient to the potion that would give Phoebe power over the demons before she vanquished them. Technically the "power over others" aspect was usually reserved for love spells, but Phoebe knew it would work just as well at bending a demon's will. Before they disappeared, she wanted to learn why they had been sent.

Conveniently, Piper and Leo had just used vanilla in the cake they'd made for dessert, so it was at the front of the cabinet. Inconveniently,

that cabinet was still above the counter and Phoebe would need to stand up to reach it. Unless she found a way to get the bottle to come to her.

Phoebe could hear shuffling from the other side of the island. The demons were going to make their move. If they were even remotely intelligent, she assumed two of them were going to flank her while the other waited for her on the other side of the island. Either way, she didn't have much time.

Sliding to the left, she reached for the green bottle she had been looking for: ague root. The root alone would not do the demons any damage, but it would hold them back long enough for Phoebe to do what she needed to do. She grabbed the bottle and popped up from her hiding place, then threw the bottle at the feet of the nearest one. Before she could see what happened, Phoebe ducked back behind the island as a collection of pots and pans barely missed her head.

She could hear the demons howl in frustration over the sound of the crashing kitchenware and breaking glass. The distraction had worked. In addition to setting up a temporary barrier between herself and the demons, one of the pots had smashed the cabinet open for her. Phoebe grabbed her potion and jumped back up. The demons were stuck behind the power of the ague root, if only temporarily. Phoebe reached

for the vanilla and poured the entire contents of the bottle into her potion, then turned and threw it at the three demons.

The glass bottle broke on the edge of the island, sending the potion scattering toward the demons. The trio howled in pain and anger, but Phoebe noticed, too late, that while she was hiding, a fourth demon had joined them and was safely off in a corner away from the potion. Oddly enough, he was holding a video camera.

Phoebe barely had time to notice his presence in the room before the demon dropped the camera to his side and threw a series of power balls toward her. Phoebe dove for cover before she had a chance to realize that she was not the intended target. As she hit the ground, she heard the three demons scream in agony. Then, everything went silent.

When Phoebe dared to peek out from her hiding spot, she saw that all four of the demons were gone. Three scorch marks were burned into the floor where the trio had stood, but there was no sign of what had become of the demon with the video camera.

Piper heard the screams from the kitchen. She breathed a sigh of relief when it was clear that none of them were coming from her sister. That was a good sign. In fact, it seemed like the tide of the battle had been shifting in their direction. She and Paige had managed to push the demons

back to the living room in the past minute, taking out a pair of demons along the way. The one with the video camera had popped out of the room briefly, but he was back to taping the proceedings.

"How's it going out here?" Phoebe said as she joined her sisters in the living room.

"Oh, you know, same ol' same ol'," Paige said as she retrieved the carving knife from the floor and threw it at another demon.

With her sisters focused on the fighting demons, Piper turned her attention to the one with the camera, who was standing in a corner recording the action for posterity or whatever. Piper was about to blow the demon up, when he dropped the camera and yelled out, "Now!"

The remaining demons all thrust out their arms in unison, sending a wave of energy at the Charmed Ones that knocked them off their feet and into the conservatory. Piper managed to remain conscious, but every bone in her body ached. She knew she wasn't about to get up anytime soon, and it looked like her sisters were in the same situation. They didn't have time to let their wounds heal, though, because the demons were approaching.

Piper worked up what little energy she had and was about to freeze time when she saw Leo coming down the stairs, brandishing a loaded crossbow. He quickly took in the situation and fired at the nearest demon from his position on

the landing. The arrow struck its target in the back, sending the demon up in flames. Leo reloaded as the other demons noticed their compatriot had just exploded.

Another arrow flew, sticking in the shoulder of one of the demons, but doing little damage beyond that. The demons turned almost in unison as Leo prepared another attack.

"Leo, look out!" Piper yelled as an energy ball flew in his direction.

Leo dropped the crossbow and dove from the landing as the camera-wielding demon flung a ball of energy across the room. The banister burst into flames above Leo, sending shards of wood in every direction, including into his shoulder.

Leo winced in pain as he pulled a dagger from his belt and drove it into the leg of the demon he had landed beside. With an arrow in his shoulder and a blade in his hamstring, the demon screamed in pain and rage. He balled his fist and prepared to strike at Leo, who was struggling to open a butterfly knife that seemed magically hexed to close as soon as it had opened.

This was enough for Piper. She was not about to stand by as the demon pounded the life out of her husband. Summoning what little strength she had in reserve, Piper countered with her own fires. She used her powers to speed up the molecules in the remaining demons, causing them to explode one by one, saving the one with the video camera for last.

She had hoped that she'd be able to get some answers from the demon, but he quickly realized his peril. With the camera still in position, he blinked out of Halliwell Manor before the Charmed Ones could capture him.

"Please don't tell me we're on another reality show," Phoebe said, wiping some demon scorch and the remnants of what looked to be chocolate cake off her blouse.

"Just the same one as always," Paige replied, helping her sister up off the ground. "*Survivor*."

Once calm had fallen over the Manor again, Leo had the chance to look over the damage to the place. It helped him ignore the damage to his own body. He hadn't had a chance to take in the destruction when he had come down the stairs because he was too busy focusing on his family in danger.

The Manor was a mess. It didn't help that Leo was bleeding on the rug, but there was little he could do about that at the moment. At least everyone was alive. Still, it hurt him that he couldn't have done more during the battle.

"I thought I told you to stay with the kids," Piper said as she rushed to her husband's side. She cringed at the wood shard sticking out of his shoulder, while she also worried about their sons, Wyatt and Chris. "Come here." Piper led him over to one of the chairs in the dining room.

"Like I could just sit upstairs while I heard

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all Hell literally breaking loose down here," Leo said.

"And where did you get this arsenal?" Paige asked as she followed them into the room with the weapons he had carried.

"They were confiscated from the students at Magic School," Leo said. "I thought they might come in handy here. Didn't realize that there was a trick knife mixed in with other stuff." If the butterfly knife had worked the way it was supposed to, he could have taken out that demon before Piper had been forced to destroy them all to protect him. Then, maybe they could have gotten some answers as to why the demons had attacked in force entirely unprovoked.

Phoebe took the butterfly knife out of her sister's hands to examine it. "What kind of place are you running there?"

"Hold still," Piper said, ignoring the talk of weaponry. "This is going to hurt." She pulled the piece of wood out of her husband's shoulder and grabbed a clean napkin off the table, holding it on the small wound to stop the blood flow. Paige got an emergency kit out of the buffet. The sisters had recently taken to placing a small medical kit in every room of the house. It had seemed like a good idea, considering the number of times they were attacked during the course of the average week.

"We should have Wyatt heal this," Piper said as she continued to minister to Leo's wounds.

"I am not about to use my son to heal every scratch," Leo said. "It will be fine on its own."

"This is more than just a small scratch," Piper replied.

"It will heal," he said. "You seem to have forgotten that I used to be a medic. This is nothing." Leo took small solace in the fact that his medical knowledge was still useful. That was all he could provide to the Charmed Ones these days: knowledge in the areas of magic and medicine. Just knowledge. Since he was powerless, there was very little in the area of practical application that he could do.

Leo had recently fallen from grace with the Elders and become mortal again when he had chosen his family over the Elders. No more charges. No more orbing. No more healing or magic of any kind. After a brief bout of questioning his entire existence, he had taken over for Paige as the head of Magic School, teaching a new generation of witches with his vast magical knowledge. As much as the work at Magic School was helping Leo cope with the loss of his abilities, he still couldn't help but feel a little useless around the house, especially when demons were trying to kill his family.

"So much for dinner," Leo said as he looked at the trail of turkey gravy on the dining room wall. He and Piper had made the meal together. Actually, Piper had made most of the meal while Leo tried to make himself useful in the kitchen

but largely found himself getting in the way. He was doing that a lot lately.

"My sentiments exactly. We can order out," she said. "At least the damage to the house was relatively minimal."

"Relatively," he emphasized. He made a quick estimate of the destruction around them: broken banister, a few smashed dishes, and probably some damage to the kitchen, too. Just some more work around the house for him. Things were now coming full circle for him since he had entered the lives of the Charmed Ones posing as a maintenance man. At least he had the household chores to keep himself busy.

Leo knew that he contributed to the family. But no matter how much he did around the house, or at Magic School, the feeling of helplessness during a demon battle was starting to wear on him. There had to be a way he could be more proactive besides taking the kids to safety. Technically, he didn't even need to do that since Wyatt could just orb himself and his baby brother, Chris, upstairs.

"So, any idea who those demons were?" Paige asked. The question was posed to the room, but Leo had a feeling they were expecting him to answer.

"They seemed fairly lower level," he said. "Don't know what the videotaping was about."

"You think Zankou could be up to something?" Piper asked.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Leo said. The most powerful demon in the Underworld had been making a lot of trouble for the Charmed Ones lately. Lesser demons had called upon Zankou to help take on the Avatars, but he continued to stick around once they were gone. Zankou had been trying to get access to the Manor and the spiritual nexus that lay beneath it. "But I don't know what he'd need to tape the fight for."

"Maybe he's looking for a weakness in our defenses," Phoebe suggested. "A way to get inside."

"You'd think he knew enough about us by now," Paige added as she picked pieces of a broken plate out of the green bean casserole. "Well, it looks like dinner is sufficiently dead."

"Honey, why don't you go pick up some Chinese for us from Chang's," Piper suggested to Leo. "I think the boys might want to go out for a walk."

"Why do I get the feeling you're trying to get rid of me?" Leo asked. Lately, she had been sending him away whenever danger entered the picture. Although, in this case, danger had already entered and left. Then again, just because the danger was gone at the moment didn't mean that it couldn't come back.

"We still need to eat," she reminded him. "And I don't want the boys down here until we clean up all the glass"—a plate that had been

balancing on the buffet suddenly fell and smashed onto the floor—"and other stuff."

"And you're worried the demons might come back and I could get hurt again?" Leo asked. It was more of an accusation than a question. Phoebe and Paige silently slipped into the kitchen. Both had clearly recognized the tone in Leo's voice and knew that it would be better if they started cleaning up in the other room.

"Honey—" Piper started.

"I'm beginning to not like it when you call me 'honey,'" Leo said. Lately, that term of endearment was usually followed by a stressful conversation.

"Okay, dear," she said, trying—and failing—to make light of the situation.

"You don't have to protect me all the time," Leo said, trying to head off the conversation before it started.

"And you don't have to rush into the middle of a battle all the time either," Piper countered.

"So you just want me to stand by and watch my family get attacked?"

"No, I want you to protect your sons."

"Wyatt can protect himself and Chris better than I can," Leo said, hating the truth behind that statement. It was a parent's job to protect his children, but what could he do when his infant son had far more power than he did?

"Who's going to protect them if we both die in a fight?" Piper asked softly so their sons didn't overhear. Leo suspected it had come out a little

more harshly than she had intended. At least he hoped that it had. "You're not immortal anymore."

"I was never truly immortal, you know," he reminded her. His life had been in just as much danger when he was a Whitelighter and an Elder. Any number of magical beings could have killed him just as easily back then, too. He had never considered himself truly immortal, just long-lived.

"But you could heal yourself," Piper said. "And you could heal me. Now it's dangerous for us both."

"Would you prefer if I had left you altogether?" Leo asked. "Stayed an Elder and forgotten about you and the boys?" That had been his punishment for working with the Avatars to remake the world; either he stayed with his family or turned his back on them to rejoin the Elders.

"No," Piper said. "But we have to deal with the reality. You don't have the abilities that you used to have."

"So, I'm useless."

"Yes," Piper said, surprising them both. "In a fight, you are useless. Is that what you want to hear? You are useless to me if you're dead. You're useless to the children if we're both dead. You need to protect yourself so I don't have to."

There was a long, drawn-out silence. They both knew that Piper didn't mean what she had said. Still, they could not ignore the truth behind the words.

"So, I'm sent off to get dinner," Leo said.

"Unless you want to pick broken pieces of plates out of the turkey," Piper said. "And maybe you could—"

"I'll take the boys with me," Leo said as he went to the conservatory to get their stroller.

"I love you," Piper said.

"I love you, too," Leo replied.

There didn't sound like a lot of love in either of their statements.

Chapter 2

Piper kept watching the street long after Leo and the boys had turned the corner and continued on to the Chinese food restaurant. She hadn't intended for that conversation to go the way that it had. It wasn't anything like the many times that she had rehearsed it in her head. Piper couldn't help how much she was worried about Leo's safety. Just because he was no longer a magical being didn't mean he wasn't powerless in the fight against evil. She knew that. But, at the same time, he couldn't be as active a participant as he had before.

Didn't he learn anything from Paige's relationship with Brody, or Prue and Andy? Piper tore herself away from the window. The Charmed Ones had often run into problems in their relationships with mortals, but this was different. Leo was once a powerful being. He wasn't anymore. And he had to realize that, as much as his help was appreciated, he was not the same man. Piper

would have to find a way to show him that. She just needed to find one that had less anger in her approach. *Good luck with that*, she thought.

Piper's mind kept rolling over the problem as she joined her sisters in the kitchen. It was as good a place as any to start their cleanup. Besides, then they could sit around the kitchen table to eat when Leo returned with the food. It had to look better than the dining room.

When Piper entered the kitchen, she immediately re-evaluated that idea.

The kitchen looked just as bad as the rest of the ground floor. That was especially impressive as it had had fewer demons per square foot than the rest of the attack.

"Leave it to Phoebe to make a bigger mess than the rest of us combined," Piper said lightly as she joined her sisters.

"Is it my fault you two left me on my own to deal with the demons?" Phoebe replied. "I'm the one—"

"With no active power," Piper and Paige finished their sister's sentence for her. "We know."

Though they were making light of the situation, Piper was having a hard time looking past the destruction to her kitchen. As much as Leo was her primary concern at the moment, it didn't diminish the fear she had for her sisters. Any battle could be their last. And, by the looks of the kitchen, this one had come pretty close for Phoebe.

The contents of the cupboards were either destroyed or littering the floor. Chairs were overturned, and the kitchen table had been pushed against the wall during the fight. There were also three scorch marks in the floor that were going to take some considerable scrubbing to get out. Clearly Phoebe had taken cover behind the island, as it seemed that was where the brunt of the attack had been focused.

Piper started with the kitchen table, figuring that it would be best to have at least one surface in the house that they could eat off of. It didn't hurt that her sisters were focusing their cleaning behind the center island. Piper wanted some time alone with her thoughts. There had to be a way to make Leo useful in battle without worrying about him every minute. If only she could figure out what it was.

Unfortunately, Phoebe had a different plan and swept her way over to her sister.

"So you're sending Leo away now?" Phoebe asked she swept up the broken glass around the chairs.

Piper shrugged as she grabbed the dustpan. "We need to eat."

"You can't protect Leo all the time," Phoebe said. "And you certainly can't make him go on errands whenever demons come around."

"Maybe there's a way to give him a protective bubble, like Wyatt," Piper thought out loud. "We should try to come up with a spell."

"So he can watch his wife be attacked while he's stuck in a bubble?" Phoebe asked gently. "Do you really think he'd go for that?"

"Tell you what, Phoebe . . . you watch your husband get impaled by a wooden stake while you're worrying that your kids are safe and you're also trying to keep from dying yourself, then get back to me about how I deal with my family." Clearly there was still some residual anger from her conversation with Leo.

"Point taken," Phoebe said, sounding more than a little hurt.

"I'm sorry," Piper said. She had to stop snapping at loved ones. She knew it was coming from her fear, but that was no excuse. "I'm just worrying all the time."

"Nothing new there," Paige said, which earned her a look from Phoebe. "What? This is how we live. It's how you've been living since before I ever met you."

"Yes, but Leo was a Whitelighter back then," Piper needlessly reminded her sister.

"Right," Paige said. "He was a Whitelighter for decades. Not to mention an Elder and an Avatar as well. And a soldier before all that. He knows how to take care of himself. Just because he's mortal now doesn't mean he's fragile as glass. Darryl's been helping us all this time, and he's mortal."

"Right. And plenty of mortals have died helping us too," Piper said. She knew she didn't

have to remind Paige of that fact, but she was feeling defensive. It didn't help that her sisters were teaming up on her. At least, that's the way it felt.

Piper picked up one of the chairs and took a seat. "I know what you're saying, but I still worry. That's not going to change no matter how much logic you throw at me."

"You can worry without treating Leo like he's fragile as glass," Phoebe said. "I know this is hard on the both of you, but imagine how difficult it is for Leo. He knows he can't be as helpful as he used to be, but he also just can't sit back and watch."

"Hence the arsenal," Paige added.

Piper thought back to the weapons Leo had loaded himself down with before joining the attack. She took some solace in the fact that he hadn't just rushed in defenseless to save them. At the same time, she did have some concern over the fact that he was keeping the dangerous weapons in the house with their children around. Still, she could only deal with one issue at a time. And, right now, the overriding issue was finding out why they had been attacked in the first place.

Piper finished righting the rest of the chairs. Between her and Phoebe, they had cleared a nice section of the kitchen for them to have dinner. "This looks good enough," Piper said, ignoring the mess on the other side of the room. "I'm

going to check the Book of Shadows and see if I can find out anything about those demons before the camera guy comes back with more of his friends."

As if on cue, they heard a huge crash from above.

"Too late," Phoebe said as the sisters dropped their cleaning supplies and headed for the trouble.

"Thanks for the extra cookies, Mr. Chang," Leo said. "We can use all the good fortune we can get." Leo told the boys to wave good-bye to the proprietor of the Chinese food restaurant while he placed the bag of takeout in the back of the two-seater stroller. Another customer held the door open for him as he pushed the stroller out into the warm night air. They were only a few blocks from home, but the short trip had given him some time to think over the events of the evening.

Leo had thought that he was over his general feelings of uselessness since becoming mortal again. Working at Magic School had certainly helped. The opportunity to teach a new generation of witches—along with his own sons someday—had given him a new outlook on life. But none of that negated the fact that in a demonic battle, he was a liability. Fists were hardly useful against fireballs.

Piper's right, he thought. *I should back off and let*

her and her sisters do the heavy lifting. But Leo knew that was never going to happen. He could never just stand by and watch while Piper put her life on the line time after time. He couldn't do that with anyone, least of all his wife. *But still, there has to be a way to be involved without getting myself killed in the process.*

Leo knew that if there was a way, they would have found it already. Mortals had come in and out of the Charmed Ones' lives over the years and they had all faced the same problems. The Warren witches were demon magnets. And now that the torch had been passed to the three most powerful Warrens of all time, demon fighting was the order of business in the Manor. He certainly didn't see it getting easier anytime soon.

Wyatt let out a gurgled cry that roused Leo from his musings.

"It's okay, little guy," Leo assured his son. "Everything's going to be fine." He couldn't be sure if Wyatt knew what was going on with his father. The boy had already proven to be incredibly sensitive. That just made Leo even more concerned about the future. How was he supposed to raise a son with Wyatt's power? Or Chris's, for that matter? Even if he locked them in their rooms to punish them, they could just orb anywhere in the world and he wouldn't be any the wiser.

"Now you're just being ridiculous," Leo said

out loud. That was a problem he would have had whether or not he had fallen from grace.

Leo thought back over the events of the past year. He had turned his back on the Elders by joining with the Avatars. Leo had thought he was doing good at the time. The concept of world peace was certainly noble, but he hadn't imagined that it would come at the cost of free will. When he and the Charmed Ones had finally gotten the world back in order—with a little unlikely help from the demon Zankou—he figured life would return to normal, until the Elders had determined his punishment for siding with the Avatars. Leo was forced to choose his destiny and decide between his life with the Elders or his family.

The decision had been clear. Leo chose a life with his wife and sons, but it had cost him his powers as an Elder. He had, quite literally, fallen from grace and was returned to his mortal coil. Now, he would grow old and die alongside his wife, as long as the demons didn't hurry his death along.

Was there another way? Leo wondered. Could he have sided with the Elders but found a way to be with Piper? There were always loopholes. True love found a way through even the most powerful magic.

Maybe someday Leo could convince the Elders to return his powers. He didn't need to be a Whitelighter again—nor did he want to be—

but anything would be helpful in the fight against evil. He knew that was a question for another time, though. The Elders could be difficult at times. And now they actually had a point. He had turned away from them and altered the entire world in the process. A price had to be paid.

None of that did anything for the situation at hand. He would continue to be a liability unless he found a way to help the Charmed Ones beyond just the information he could provide. There had to be an active way he could take part in the fight.

But how?

Leo's mind was working out ideas as he pushed the stroller up the driveway and went in through what was left of the kitchen door. The place was a mess. He hadn't seen it before he went to get dinner, but he couldn't imagine that Phoebe had had such a hard time on her own. The kitchen table was on its side, and the chairs were scattered about the room. There was a huge hole in the center of the floor, and he could see clear down to the empty basement below. It was going to take a considerable amount of repair work to fix the place. It was odd that Phoebe hadn't mentioned the extensive damage before he had left.

"I'm back," he called out as he put the brown paper bag full of Chinese food on the kitchen table. The mingling smells of the different dishes

set his mouth watering. *At least I'm useful as a delivery guy,* he mused.

"Why don't we put you guys in your playpen before I unpack the food," he said as he went back to the stroller. He figured the playpen would be the safest place for them. The conservatory had remained intact from the earlier battle.

Leo pushed the boys through the kitchen, careful to avoid the hole in the floor. As he moved toward the dining room, he saw a paper bag filled with glass and assorted herbs and spices. It looked as if the girls had started cleaning up at least. Oddly, the kitchen didn't look as though much work had been done.

He continued to the conservatory. Nothing looked any more out of place than it had when he had left. Nothing looked any cleaner, either. He would have thought that Piper would have at least cleared a place for them to eat. At this rate, they'd have to dine outside to find a clean place to sit.

It was possible that the sisters had put aside the cleaning to go check the Book of Shadows. Demons do tend to outrank cleaning in the levels of importance in Halliwell Manor. If they were up in the attic, it was possible they hadn't heard him come back,

"Piper!" Leo called out.

No response.

Leo pushed the stroller into the conservatory, but didn't bother removing the boys from their

seats. Something was wrong, and Leo didn't want to waste any time before checking it out.

"Wyatt, protect your brother," Leo said as he put his own defenses, such as they were, on alert. A blue sphere briefly flashed around the stroller, indicating that Wyatt was ready for any attack that befell him and Chris. Leo idly wished that the sphere could extend to him as well.

Nothing seemed out of place in the conservatory, either. At least, any more than it had when he had left to pick up dinner. Like the kitchen, nothing seemed any cleaner. It was like no work had been done at all in his absence.

Leo continued his search, moving into the living room. With every step, his agitation grew. From his position by the couch he was able to look back into the conservatory. His sons were still safe in Wyatt's protective sphere. Even from the distance he could see the concern etched in Wyatt's face. Leo hoped that Chris, who was just under a year old, didn't realize anything was wrong. Then again, Chris was unusually silent, as if he knew not to make a sound. For the millionth time, Leo wished that his sons could be raised in a normal, safe environment. Then he immediately put that thought right out of his head. He needed to focus on protecting his sons and finding his wife.

"Piper!" he called out. "Phoebe! Paige!"

Still nothing.

The house was quiet. Leo knew that he had to

go upstairs, but he didn't want to leave his sons alone. He wished he could drop the kids off with a neighbor, but their closest neighbors tended to steer clear of the Manor. Besides, if demons were about, Leo didn't want to put any Innocents in jeopardy.

Hoping that Wyatt's protective sphere was enough to keep his sons safe, Leo ascended the stairs. He moved slowly and quietly, listening for noises above him and below him. He wished that he had some of the weapons from earlier, but he wasn't sure where Piper had put them. Any time lost while searching the house could mean more time his wife's life was in danger. It was always possible that the attic door was closed and they couldn't hear him, but somehow Leo doubted that.

When he reached the second floor, Leo gave up all hope that things were remotely normal. The earlier battle had been confined to the first floor. He alone had been the only one to go upstairs. Yet, there was now a tremendous amount of destruction where there had been none before. Scorch marks were on the walls. The window had been smashed clean through. The door to Phoebe's room had been kicked in.

Leo did a quick room-by-room search, but found nothing. Abandoning all caution, he ran upstairs to the attic. It was the lone room of calm in a sea of destruction. The Book of Shadows sat safely on its pedestal. Nothing

had been damaged. No furniture overturned. Yet this was the most disturbing room in the house, if only for the fact that it was empty.

It meant the Charmed Ones were gone.

Chapter 3

"What is it you want me to do?" Inspector Darryl Morris asked as he surveyed the damage to Halliwell Manor. As far as Leo was concerned, it didn't look any better in the light of day than it had the night before. Leo had scoured the house for clues to what had happened in his absence, but he hadn't yet bothered to clean up anything beyond covering the hole in the kitchen floor. There would be time for cleaning when everyone was back home.

The Chinese food was still sitting out in the kitchen. The boys had been fed their breakfast, but that was the only thing Leo had done that wasn't directly tied to his search since he had returned home the night before. He ignored the noises from his stomach. Food wasn't important at the moment. Only one thing mattered to him.

"I want you to find my family," Leo said. Piper, Phoebe, and Paige had been missing for over twelve hours. Not that Leo had been sitting

around doing nothing during that time. His cell phone calls had rolled to voice mail. He had called out to Paige's sensitive Whitelighter side, but those pleas also went unanswered. He had even tried scrying for them, but knew it was useless since he had no magic of his own. Piper and her sisters were gone. And Leo had no way to find them.

"Leo, look around you." Darryl held a hand out over the devastation. "This is supernatural. What do you expect me to do?"

"I expect you to check with sources. See if anyone else in the area has been reported missing. If there seems to be an increase in mysterious activities. Unexplained phenomena. I want you to do everything in your power to bring them back."

"To do everything in my power, I would need to bring in the rest of the force on this," Darryl said. "The sisters haven't even been missing for a day yet. The only way to get the force involved is to report this crime scene. That would be easy to do. Enough of your neighbors called in reporting noise from the Manor last night. It wasn't hard to keep quiet. Calls come in reporting weird noises from this house at least once a week. We don't even bother to check them out anymore."

"So you're telling me you won't help?" Leo asked. He knew he was being harsh; that there was only so much a mortal police detective

could do in this case. But Leo didn't care. The mother of his children was missing.

"I'm telling you I *can't* help," Darryl said. "Investigators would have to come in to examine the house for evidence. And you've got plenty to find. Scorch marks all over the place. A mixture of potion ingredients eating up what's left of the kitchen floor. Not to mention the hole that goes down into the basement. Inspector Sheridan would be the first one through the door. Is that what you want her to see?"

"I really don't care about Sheridan right now," Leo said.

"I know," Darryl said, laying a reassuring hand on Leo's shoulder. "But you will care later. When Piper and Phoebe and Paige are back safe and sound. You'll care when Sheridan exposes them for who they are. Are you willing to take that risk?"

"Yes," Leo said, without thinking.

Darryl waited while the distraught husband calmed himself.

"No," Leo finally said. He couldn't risk them being exposed. It had been hard enough to keep the Charmed Ones' secret over the years, but it had become increasingly difficult lately with Sheridan snooping around. If Piper . . . *when* Piper returned, he didn't want to have to worry about losing her because the police were onto them.

"Leo, I will do everything I can to help you

find the girls," Darryl said. "But there's only so much I can do in this case. You know that. Why don't you reach out to the rest of the magical community?"

"I've tried," he said.

"And?"

Leo just shook his head. Once he realized that even Paige was out of contact, Leo had tried calling the Elders. He called out for help mentally—and verbally—for hours. Until he was hoarse. There had been no response. Yet, they had made their message clear at the same time: Leo was on his own. "The Elders get a little upset when you turn your back on them," he said.

"From what I've learned about them over the years, they get a little upset when you don't greet them with a bright enough smile," Darryl added. "What about the teachers at Magic School?"

"They're watching the boys right now," Leo said. "And I've got them scrying for Piper. They haven't turned up anything yet."

"Which leads me to believe we aren't going to be finding them on the streets of San Francisco," Darryl said. "Leo, of course I'm going to look into this. I'm just saying . . . I don't think you can expect much from me this time."

"I just . . . it's my family," he said.

"I know," Darryl said. "I consider them family too. But, hey, there have been things like this before. I'm sure they're fine."

"Yeah," Leo said, wishing that he could believe his friend.

Leo made his way through the debris to show Darryl out. He knew he was asking the impossible, but he was running out of options. Darryl had been growing distant from the family lately. Inspector Sheridan had been putting a lot of pressure on him at work. His wife had been putting pressure on him at home. It wasn't easy being a mortal tied up with the Charmed Ones. Darryl was the perfect example of that. Over the years he had run into his fair share of trouble trying to help.

Still, no matter how close Darryl was, he didn't have the ties to the family that Leo did. If Leo was going to contribute to the fight against evil as a mortal, this was his chance to prove it. If only he knew where to begin.

"What now?" Leo asked the empty Manor.

As if in response to his question, Leo heard footsteps coming from the stairs. He turned and braced for an attack, but relaxed when he saw the familiar black robe belonging to one of the Magic School teachers coming down from the second floor. The sisters had installed a portal to Magic School up there so that Leo could come and go as he pleased without relying on Paige's magic to orb him there. Not having magic of his own made it difficult to commute to work in a different realm.

The robe belonged to the newest addition to the teaching staff at Magic School: Nisha

Maksoud. Nisha had been a recent graduate of Magic School. She had excelled in the study of healing herbs and spent a year in the rain forest studying the flora there. Upon her return, Paige had invited her back to the school as a professor. Nisha was still getting her feet wet as a teacher, which was particularly difficult for her because she was only slightly older than the students. But she was a genius when it came to her lessons in potions for healing. Leo thought it might be a good idea to have her around. She had already made his wound from the previous night disappear.

Leo bypassed any greeting and got right to the point. "Find anything, Nisha?"

She shook her head. "They're not anywhere on Earth. They have to be in the Underworld."

"That's what I was afraid of," he said, pacing about the living room. "Anything more on those demons?"

"We really couldn't get much off your description," Nisha said. "At least not in the books. They seemed pretty minor league. And nothing made any sense about the videotaping, except some old show called *Witch Wars*."

"Yeah, we've already dealt with that one," Leo said.

Nisha heard the disappointment in his voice. Leo wanted to reassure her that he wasn't upset with her over the lack of leads, but he was so tired that he couldn't find a way to do

it that wouldn't come across as patronizing.

"You should get some sleep," Nisha said. "You look exhausted."

"I'm not going to be able to sleep until my wife is home."

"Then you should let me make you a potion to clear your mind; give you a fresh outlook on things," she said as she moved toward the kitchen. "Where do you keep your herbs? In here? That's where I keep mine. Helps to be near the stove for heating things up when . . . wow." Nisha hadn't been in the kitchen earlier. This was her first look at the devastation.

"Yeah," Leo said as he came up behind her. "I haven't had time to clean."

"I'll clean as I go," Nisha said as she picked a couple bottles off the floor and examined the contents. "Looks like you've got most of the stuff I need. I can just pop back to Magic School for any missing ingredients."

"Try the attic first," Leo suggested as he slumped in one of the kitchen chairs. "We keep some things up there, too."

"Will do," she said brightly as she filled a small pot with water. It had been conveniently lying on the floor by the stove.

Leo couldn't help but think of Piper as Nisha stood over the sink. Had it only been yesterday that they had decided to make a big family dinner together? It had been a spur-of-the-moment thing. There was nothing to celebrate.

No reason other than to enjoy a quiet night when everyone was home. If only they had known how it would have ended, they would have gone out for pizza instead.

Nisha peeked in the bag of untouched Chinese food from the previous night. "Ehh?"

Leo laughed at her reaction. It was the first time he had smiled since the night before. Then he was immediately filled with regret. He had no right to enjoy himself while Piper's life was potentially in jeopardy. But he had already exhausted most avenues of research. Except . . .

"We need to starting hitting up some demon sources," Leo said. "Hear what they're whispering about in the Underworld."

Nisha was staring into the pot, which she was heating on the stove. Leo could tell that she was uncomfortable with that suggestion.

"Shouldn't we wait until we've looked through all the books?" Nisha suggested. "We might have missed something."

"No reason we can't do both at the same time," Leo said.

Nisha was still hesitant. "True. But where would you begin?"

Leo noticed that she had changed the "we" to "you." He couldn't blame her. She was one of the best in her field of herbology, but she wasn't used to battling demons. Sometimes it was easy to forget that not every witch was

forced to save the world on a weekly basis.

"Don't worry, Nisha," Leo said. "I'll take care of that."

"But is it safe?" she asked as she sprinkled some ingredients into the heating water. "Without your powers? And how are you going to find anything out without letting people know your family is missing?"

"I'll find a way," he said. She was raising some good questions, but Leo knew he was on the right track. An answer would come. He only had to figure it out. Of course, it would be easier if his mind were clearer. He didn't want to admit it to himself, but the lack of food and sleep had been getting to him. The scents from the potion Nisha was mixing certainly didn't help.

Is it getting warmer in here?

"Here," Nisha said as she placed a teacup in front of him. The scent of the tea was instantly calming to him.

But didn't she just start making the potion?

It was possible that he had dozed off for a moment. The warm air was relaxing.

"Drink up," Nisha said.

Leo lifted the teacup to his lips and took a sip. The warm liquid poured down his throat. He could feel the power of the drink as it spread throughout his body. He just managed to put the cup back down on the table before everything went dark.

• • •

There was a light.

Then another.

Soon, dozens of blue-white lights filled the darkness. They were orbs, dancing about, waiting to take a form, yet nothing emerged. They just continued their dance.

Leo reached out to touch them, but they drifted away from him. He moved toward the orbs, but they continued their frenetic dance. Always out of reach. Always moving. Refusing to be caught.

Something existed beyond the orbs. It was a woman. Standing in shadow.

Leo called out to her.

"Piper!"

She did not respond.

Leo moved toward her. The orbs continued their dance, obscuring his view. The closer he got to the woman, the faster the orbs jerked about. The lights were blinding him. Keeping him from seeing her true image.

Leo was close enough to touch her when he realized his mistake. It wasn't Piper. It was someone else. Someone from his past.

Someone who could help him find his wife.

Leo woke with a start. He was in the kitchen. Alone.

He looked for the clock, but it was smashed on the floor, frozen in time from the night before. The light coming in from the windows was still bright. It was early in the day. That much was

clear. But where was Nisha? And what had she done to him?

"Oh, you're up," Nisha said as she popped up from beside the island. "I was just trying to get rid of these scorch marks. I never knew dead demons could be so messy."

"What did you do to me?" Leo asked as his groggy mind began to clear.

"I told you," Nisha said. "It was a potion to wake you up."

"But it knocked me out," Leo said.

"Well, how else do you expect to wake up if you don't get some sleep first?"

"Nisha!"

"Don't worry," Nisha said. "You were only out for a half hour. You needed the rest. And that potion gave you the equivalent of a full night in only thirty minutes."

"You drugged me."

"Technically, that's true," Nisha said. "But don't you feel better now?"

Leo wanted to be angry with her, but he couldn't argue with the fact that he did feel refreshed. The rest *had* done him some good. And, more importantly, now that his mind was clear, he knew what he had to do.

Chapter 4

Piper's head was throbbing, though she couldn't remember why. All that filled her mind was the pain. The pain and the darkness, that is. At least the second part she could do something about. She opened her eyes.

The bright light did nothing to help the pain, but it was a considerable defense against the darkness. She didn't know where she was exactly, but she had a pretty good guess on the general realm. No matter how many times she visited, or how many different parts of it she explored, it always felt the same. The air was thick and oppressive. And somehow, she always felt a deep sense of dread. She was in the Underworld. Had to be. Though, if it was the Underworld, she was in one of the strangest parts of the Underworld she had even seen.

There weren't any dark cave walls or demon fires burning. In fact, the place was brightly lit by rather unflattering florescent lights. In place

of pentagrams, a periodic table was hanging on the white cinder-block wall. Instead of smoking cauldrons, there were multicolored liquids in test tubes. The scents wafting from the glass beakers were more chemical than herbal. Lying there in a small metal cage, Piper felt not unlike a lab rat waiting for the tests to begin.

She wasn't sure how long she had been unconscious. She didn't know if she could trust her body at the moment, but it felt like she had been sleeping for hours. If only she had worn a watch, she would have had a better idea of whether it was still night. Then again, it could have just as easily been the next day. Not that time mattered much in the Underworld, but she wanted to know how long she had been gone from home. Had Leo gotten back from the restaurant yet? Had he been back for hours? Days?

There were no windows in the room, save the small one in the metal door a dozen feet away from her cage. Piper had no idea what was on the other side, but she hoped her sisters were out there somewhere. Actually, she hoped they were home working with Leo on her rescue. She only wished that she could do something to help them. Piper had no memory of being put in the cage, but the details of the attack that had preceded her abduction were slowly coming back to her.

Leo had just left to pick up dinner with the

boys. They had argued over him fighting demons. Then she had joined her sisters in the kitchen. They were cleaning up after a demon battle when they heard a noise from above. Fearing another attack, they dropped what they were doing and went to find out what was going on.

Piper never made it past the kitchen door.

The last one out of the room, Piper stopped when she heard a noise behind her. She turned to see a pair of demons standing inside the back door. They had knocked over a few pots to get her attention.

"Piper?" Phoebe called from the dining room.

"I got it," Piper replied. "You two see what's going on upstairs."

There was a pause before Phoebe said, "Okay."

"Look," Piper said. "You guys have already ruined one dinner tonight. All we want is to have one meal in peace. Is that so much to ask?"

In response, the larger of the two demons shot lasers out of his eyes at her. Piper ducked left, throwing a little half-roll onto the end before popping up again. "What the hell was that?," she screamed. The big guy responded with another laser blast that burned a pair of lines down the kitchen wall.

The smaller of the two demons wore a tattoo of green vines covering the right side of his face. The tattoo continued down his neck and into his shirt, coming out of his right sleeve. She didn't have to wait for long to find out his mystery

power. He raised that tattoo-covered arm, and the ground beneath Piper began to shake. At first, she thought it was another one of San Francisco's famed earthquakes, but it quickly became obvious that the shock wave was only being felt in a tightly limited area. The few undamaged glasses and plates that remained in the cupboard across the room were perfectly still. The shaking seemed to be confined to a three-foot radius with Piper at the epicenter.

Piper flung her hands up and stopped time. Both of the demons froze, but oddly enough, the ground beneath her continued shaking. Even blowing up the demon didn't stop the ground from rolling.

Kitchen chairs toppled around her as Piper moved over to the island to steady herself, but the earthquake seemed to follow her across the room. She took out the other demon, blowing him up in a fireball, hoping that that would end the rumbling.

It didn't change a thing.

Piper tried freezing time again, wondering if this magical rumbling would ever end. It didn't. She clung to the island, but the shaking was too strong. The floor buckled beneath her. Splinters of wood came up around her feet. Her hands slipped from the counter, and the ground swallowed her. The last thing she saw was one of the kitchen chairs as she dropped through the floor.

Then everything went black.

Now that she was conscious once again, Piper pulled herself up off the linoleum floor. It certainly was a far cry from the typical wall-to-wall dirt that made most demon lairs in the Underworld seem all the more homey. Of course, it was possible that she was being held somewhere on Earth. There was certainly nothing in the room that screamed out "Underworld"—like tortured victims screaming out in agony. That would definitely have cinched it for her. But she still felt it: the oppressive evil that permeated the very air. She was in Demonville, all right. And without Paige to orb her back home. Or Phoebe, either. She wondered where her sisters had gone. Had they managed to take on their attackers? Or were they kidnapped, too?

Piper hugged her arms against her body and felt something inside her sleeve. She rolled back the sleeve all the way to the elbow and found a Band-Aid that she was pretty sure had not been there before. She peeled it away to find a small puncture wound, surrounded by a slight bruise. *This is not good.*

Someone had injected her with something. Or they had drawn blood. She looked around the room again. Toward the center of the lab there was a huge glass-and-metal contraption, complete with bubbling liquids and Bunsen burners. At the center of the apparatus sat three vials filled with a red liquid that looked like blood, slowly heating over a fire. It didn't take a scientist to make a

hypothesis that the blood had come from her and possibly her sisters. *This is new,* she thought.

She wished that she could take a closer look at whatever odd experiment was taking place in the room, but the cage held her in place. The lock looked pretty standard: a typical metal plate with a keyhole in the center. Kind of like the old jail cells she saw in Westerns . . . or that episode of *The Brady Bunch* where the family visited the Grand Canyon. Piper tried to blow up the lock, but didn't even manage to create a wisp of smoke. She then focused her attention on the hinges of the cage door, but nothing happened there, either. The bars stood fast as well, causing Piper to worry that maybe something was wrong with her powers. If she had lost her abilities, it was going to make getting out of there even more difficult.

She tried taking out one of the beakers on a nearby table. It exploded with a brilliant flash, sending the blue liquid inside spilling out all over the table where it began to eat through the wood. "Well, maybe that will get someone's attention," Piper said to herself.

She looked over at the experiment again. It didn't really matter what her abductor was up to. Any experiment that centered on the blood of the Charmed Ones was not something she wanted to succeed. Piper lifted her hands in that direction and demolished the three vials.

Thinking that she was onto something, Piper

turned to another rack of test tubes and blew that up as well. *It might not get anyone's attention, but it's making me feel better,* she thought as she set about blowing up everything in the room.

Paige could have sworn she heard small explosions coming from somewhere off in the distance. She figured that would have to be a good thing. Either it was one of her sisters or an unknown entity, like the enemy of her enemy or some such. She wasn't going to worry too much about it. She'd take whatever help she could get. It wasn't like she was having any luck getting out on her own.

Paige had woken up lying on the cold concrete floor of a huge, circular room. The place was totally empty except for two guards stationed at doors opposite each other. Actually, the room was empty except for the guards *and* the invisible energy field that she was trapped inside. She wasn't sure how she had gotten there. The last thing she remembered was being in the hall outside Phoebe's bedroom.

She and Phoebe had gone on ahead to check out the noise in the attic, even though they hadn't wanted to leave Piper behind in the kitchen. They quickly but cautiously rushed up the stairs to the second floor, only to run right into a line of demons blocking their path. The demons filled the hall in a V-shape formation, like geese flying south for the winter. Though

they looked slightly more intimidating than geese.

It was five against two. Considering what they had already managed earlier that evening, the odds were nicely stacked on the witches' side. Paige still didn't know who was behind these attacks, but he didn't seem to be learning anything. She checked for the camera guy, but he wasn't there. It was possible that these could have been different demons entirely, but two attacks in one night from different demon factions would have been a bit of a coincidence. Not unheard of, just a coincidence.

"Only five of you this time?" Paige said. She turned to Phoebe. "You want to sit this one out?"

"I want to get this one over with," Phoebe replied.

"Good idea," Paige said. "Glass!" The glass from the round hall mirror orbed out of its frame and into Paige's hand. She held it like a discus and aimed it at the center-most demon. He barely had time to react before the glass decapitated him. His body exploded into flames before it hit the ground.

"Okay, ew," Phoebe said. "But effective."

The four remaining demons split up as much as they could in the limited hall space. Two dropped back while the other two approached the girls. Paige looked for another weapon, but the hall was relatively empty except for a glass vase that Phoebe was already throwing at their nearest attacker.

The vase smashed the female demon in the face and drenched her in water and flowers at the same time. The combination of broken glass and flora gave Paige an idea. Paige thrust her hands forward and called out, "Demon!" The demon burst into orbs that Paige sent flying backward through the hall. The demon reconstituted just as the orbs reached the window and her body was slashed as she went through the glass. Paige could see the light from the explosion when the demon landed in the flower bed below.

"Nice," Phoebe said.

Another crash was heard from the attic.

"Go check that out," Phoebe said as the three remaining demons approached.

"Are you sure?" Paige asked.

"Go!" Phoebe insisted.

Paige hadn't wanted to leave her sister behind, but she knew the Book of Shadows needed to be protected. With one last look at Phoebe, Paige orbed herself up to the attic. Or, that's where she had thought she was orbing herself to. Instead, she found herself in this huge empty room. But before Paige could take even two steps, she had inexplicably fallen asleep.

She woke what felt like hours later with the two guards—whom she named Frick and Frack—watching over her. She brandished a pinpoint puncture wound on her arm covered by a Band-Aid. She asked the guards about the wound, but they didn't respond. They hadn't

said anything to her since she woke. But that didn't mean Paige had stopped trying to get a rise out of them.

"I'm guessing the old 'I have to go to the bathroom' trick isn't going to work on you guys, huh?" Paige asked. She didn't expect a response and was not surprised when she did not receive one. Frick and Frack were the strong, silent types. They hadn't even let out a laugh when they watched her walk into the energy barrier earlier, which sent a jolt of energy through her, knocking her to the ground. It had been a tough way to learn that she wasn't as free as she had initially thought.

"Yo, Frick," she called to the large female demon guarding the door to her right. She wasn't sure if the demons understood the "Frick and Frack" nomenclature, but she was beyond caring at this point. "Any chance your boss is planning to come by soon? I'd really like to meet him. Got some suggestions for furnishings. Some nice chairs and a few throw pillows would really brighten this place up. Especially the chairs."

Still nothing. Not that that was a surprise.

Paige had already tried orbing out of the energy field, but her orbs just got jolted back, much the same way her body did when it hit the energy barrier. Whatever the source of the energy field, it was pretty darn strong.

There didn't seem to be any point where the

field originated in the room. It seemed to exist all around her. It was always possible that there was no energy field at all; just some well-placed magic coming from Frick and Frack to make her think there was an invisible energy field. But she wasn't about to go exploring to test out that theory. She had already been zapped enough for one night.

Paige sat back down on the concrete floor. She really wished for that chair at the moment; she had grown tired of the limited pacing she could do in her space. There had to be a way out of her confinement. There always was. She just had to find it.

Phoebe banged on the wooden door, hoping that someone would finally get sick of listening to the noise and come look in on her. She had been banging for so long that her hand was almost rubbed raw. But she kept banging.

"Come on! I know you're out there," she yelled, though she had little idea if anyone was actually in the area. She hadn't heard or seen anyone or anything since she had woken up.

The room she was in looked like it could have been in a huge old mansion, the kind where the nearest people were in a sitting room in a total other wing of the building a mile away. Or it could have been in a nice two-story manor just down the block from her home. It was only when she had pulled back the curtains on one of

the windows that she saw the cave wall outside and realized that she was most likely in the Underworld.

As demon lairs went, it wasn't such a bad place. The room was filled with antique furniture that her late sister, Prue, would have loved—or just loved to get her hands on for her auction house. A fire burning steadily in the fireplace was keeping the place nice and toasty. Softly playing classical music filled the air from unseen speakers. Not that Phoebe could hear the music over the noise she was making. She hoped that the noise was bothering someone else's enjoyment of the music as well. Whoever had attacked and abducted her needed to come out and make him- or herself known, if only to explain why she had been pierced with a needle in her arm and left with a pathetic little Band-Aid as a gift.

Yeah, whoever brought me here has a few questions to answer, she thought.

Phoebe had watched Paige's orbs disappear in the upstairs hall and the noises coming from above had ceased. She took that as a good sign, though she hadn't expected such an immediate reaction. Paige must have reformed fighting and taken out whoever was making the noise quickly. At least, that's what Phoebe hoped had happened.

That had left her alone with a trio of demons and no weaponry to speak of. She didn't consider

it an insurmountable problem, though. Phoebe liked a good challenge. All she had to do was get to her bedroom and she would be fine. The only thing stopping her was the group of demons standing in front of her bedroom door.

"I don't suppose you three would be so moved over the loss of your friends that you'd like to call it a night and go home?" she asked.

No response.

"Didn't think so."

Moving on instinct, Phoebe ran at the demons. She had been right. Her sudden burst of speed had caught them off guard. As she approached, the demons all raised their hands, preparing whatever weapons they had at their disposal. But they didn't move fast enough. Beams of energy shot off in different directions as they scattered. When she was right on top of them, Phoebe levitated herself to the ceiling and, with a rapid succession of kicks, dropped all three demons to the floor. She then grabbed the top of the door frame, kicked her door open, and swung herself into the room, dropping down onto the bed.

Phoebe didn't stay there for long. She immediately popped up and ran for her dresser, pulling open the top drawer. Inside, she had various bits of makeup and toiletries, and a half-dozen generic potion bottles in case of such an emergency. Knowing it was best to be prepared, she and her sisters had stocked each of their rooms with

potions powerful enough to take out most lower-level demons. Between the potions and the first-aid kits, they were slowly turning the Manor into a formidable demon battleground.

Be it ever so humble . . .

Phoebe grabbed three bottles just as she heard the demons pushing their way into her room. She turned and, with a glance in their direction, threw all the bottles at the threshold. The glass smashed, spilling the contents at the feet of the demons. They barely had time to register what was happening when the potions took effect. All three demons burst into flames, leaving several small scorch marks on the door frame.

As Phoebe let out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding, she was already on the move. Paige was alone in the attic, and it had been awfully quiet since she had orbed up there. Fearing the worst, Phoebe rounded the corner as she entered the hall, but stopped dead in her tracks. Another demon was waiting for her.

The demon was not in the traditional brown rags and earth tones they usually wore. Nor was he in the black leather that more and more of the demon community seemed to be modeling these days. Oddly enough, he was in khakis, a blue button-down shirt, and a white lab coat. She barely had time to register the odd outfit before the demon pulled out his own potion bottle and threw it at her feet.

The potion that was released did not make Phoebe explode. Instead, the fumes wafted up from the floor, around her body and into her nose. The effect was immediate. The world went dark around Phoebe as she fell asleep.

She had woken up in the nicely appointed room, lying on a daybed. It had taken her a few moments to orient herself, but once she did, she began to look for a way out. It had only taken her a couple more minutes to come to the conclusion that the only escape was through the door. And that was when the banging had begun, which she had been at for about ten minutes now. At first, she actually hoped that someone would come by when they heard that she was awake. Now, anyone in the vicinity had to know she was up and must have been ignoring her. She was just waiting for someone to get annoyed enough by the noise to come check on her. So far, it hadn't happened.

When the pain had finally become too much, she dropped her hands to her sides and gave up. That was when she heard the click of the lock as someone on the other side finally opened the door.

Chapter 5

"If I knew this was the plan you were going to dream up, I wouldn't have given you the potion," Nisha said as she handed him the package she had brought back to the Manor from Magic School.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't have drugged me in the first place," Leo said as he put the item down on the dining room table. "I guess there's a lesson in this for you."

Nisha sighed. "Look, all joking aside, I don't think this is a good idea."

"Neither do I," Leo admitted. "But it's the only idea I've got at the moment, so I've got to go with it. Could you give me a moment?"

"Why?"

"Plausible deniability," he said. "When this is all over, I want you to be able to go back to Magic School and say, 'I didn't know he was going to do that.'"

"Do what?"

"My point exactly."

Nisha regarded him for a moment before giving a shrug and walking out of the room. It only took Leo a minute to do what he needed to do. He had only run Magic School for a few weeks and already he was defacing school property. The staff would be apoplectic, but he couldn't help but think it would earn him some points with the students. When he was done, he put the item in a messenger bag and hung it on his shoulder. Leo looked up at the grandfather clock as he moved into the living room. It was time.

"Anything I can say to get you to change your mind?" Nisha asked.

Leo shook his head. "How are the boys?"

"Napping," she replied. "I don't think they know anything is wrong."

"You'd be surprised at how sensitive they are," Leo said, glad that his sons were safely at Magic School. He only hoped that once they woke from their nap, both their parents would be there waiting for them.

"So," Nisha said as they reached the front door.

"So."

"Well, good luck." She gave him a hard slap on the back, forcing a nervous laugh out of him.

"Thanks," he said as he opened the door. "Keep an eye on the place."

"Will do," she said, with a mock salute.

Leo appreciated her youthful energy as he

made his way to his car. She almost made him believe that this was just a quick outing, or an errand. It certainly didn't feel like the mistake he knew it to be. But as he drove to his destination Leo was well-aware of how many dozens of ways his plan could go wrong.

The drive wasn't far, but he seemed to be worlds away from his home once he got there. Leo didn't come to this part of the city often, for obvious reasons. Even without any powers, he could sense the dark magic in the air. It was no surprise that the streets were empty. Even the least sensitive of mortals would know to stay away.

This part of the city had no formal name. It had no nickname, either. No one ever spoke of it. Not that the place was a magical realm. It was real enough that mortals could take a wrong turn and get lost there any time of the day or night. That was how most people stumbled across the area for the first—and usually only—time: by happening upon it accidentally. No one ever took to these streets as a shortcut for another destination. You couldn't really get anywhere on the streets except for back from where you had started. If you got back at all. Most maps indicated that it was just an industrial center, but that couldn't have been farther from the truth. The only industry that had ever set up shop there was the Black Magic Market.

Traders of illicit magic set up their shops

inside the ramshackle buildings that had likely never looked new. Technically, there was no such thing as "illicit magic." The items sold by the Black Magic Market could be used for good or for evil. It all depended on the user. But this was the only place on Earth where anyone could find the particularly rare and the exotic. Those items were usually only sought by those looking to do harm.

Leo wasn't looking to hurt anyone, though. He was just looking for his family. With much of the legitimate magical community unavailable to him, he needed to try some other avenues, ones that he knew but had rarely crossed into when he was one of the magical soldiers for good. That was what he had been told in his dream. His sleeping mind had given him permission to break the rules for once in his long life. Then again, if he hadn't broken the rules and turned his back on the Elders in the first place, Leo wouldn't be in this position now.

Whether or not he was still a Whitelighter or Elder, Leo knew he shouldn't be doing this. Dealers in the Black Magic Market were not to be trusted. It also didn't say much about the ease with which Leo had turned to the illegal operation. To blame it all on the dream was grasping for justifications. Next he would be telling himself it was Nisha's fault for slipping him the potion in the first place. He did find the decision a bit easier now that he was mortal. Not to say

that he had lost all moral responsibility, but the shades of gray were more vague when he didn't have to answer so directly to a higher power.

The building he had been looking for sat in total darkness at the end of the road. That was pretty impressive considering that it was noon and the sun was directly overhead. Since there were no physical obstructions blocking the sun's rays, Leo assumed that these were magical shadows, specifically placed to hide questionable activities. It figured that the place he had to go had no light available for him to use to determine the level of danger. And Leo knew that he had been in danger ever since he crossed the border into what was effectively no-man's-land.

Leo pulled his car in front of the building as he searched the shadows for an immediate threat. He knew he was being watched. Dozens of eyes had been following him from the moment he crossed the invisible threshold into the neighborhood, but there was nothing he could do about that. He was only worried about potential attacks, not curious onlookers. Still, he moved quickly into the shadows once he was out of the car.

There was no doorbell. The door seemed too thick to bother knocking on. Sound would not carry through the metal. Leo waited, as he had been instructed to do when he called ahead. Suddenly, the door opened just wide enough to permit him inside. No wider. He slipped in,

and the door softly clicked shut behind him. The interior of the building was barely brighter than the shadowy exterior, but Leo knew he was in the right place.

Aisle after aisle of bookshelves filled the room. Candles provided the least amount of illumination necessary to see the store's wares. From what Leo could make out, he had stumbled into a vast treasure trove of magical items, ranging from herbs and potions to more exotic gifts like genuine shrunken heads. Leo's eyes glanced over the nearest shelves until they came to rest on a comely proprietress.

"Leo, it has been far too long," the blond woman said with a hint of an accent. She brushed a strand of her long hair behind an ear.

"That was your choice, Xandra," he reminded her as he shifted the bag hanging from his shoulder.

"Now, now," she admonished him. "I thought when you contacted me that you had gotten past our . . . well . . . past. I thought you wanted to be friends again."

Leo shook his head in resignation. They had done this dance before. Back when Leo was a Whitelighter, Xandra had been one of the first witches assigned to him as a charge. That younger Leo, who was much more used to dealing with mortal charges, had been wholly unprepared for the rebellious witch.

Xandra had had no time for him, and even

less concern for any authority figures, especially the Elders. She had rebelled in every way possible, fighting her "destiny" on a daily basis. Finally, Leo had been forced to present her with an ultimatum: Either turn her back on the dark magics entirely or the Elders would turn their back on her. Xandra surprised Leo by not even giving it a moment's thought. She just teleported herself out of his life and out of his charge.

But that was decades earlier. She and Leo had had several run-ins since then, but nothing ever changed between them, least of all either of their appearances. Xandra's young, voluptuous form notwithstanding, she had appeared to be the same age when Leo had first met her back in the fifties. She had been improperly using magic to extend her life, pretty much since she turned her back on her true calling. Between her magical tweaks and Leo's previous immortal status, neither one looked much different from how they had when they first met. If anything, Xandra actually looked younger.

"Let's just cut to the chase," Leo said. "It is good to see you, but we won't be rekindling any friendship until you stop messing around with dark magics and stop using your powers for personal gain. There's something to be said for aging gracefully."

"And there's something to be said for the hypocrisy in your asking for my help while criticizing my lifestyle," she said. "And as for

personal gain . . ." She held her hand out toward the bag Leo was holding.

Leo considered what he was about to do. He had already made his decision before he had left the Manor, but that didn't make the actual act any easier.

"I don't think your beloved has all day," Xandra said, curling her fingers in a come hither motion.

Leo dropped the bag back toward his side. "Why? What have you heard?"

"Nothing," she quickly replied. "I just meant . . . coming to me for help. Your wife must be in some real danger."

"I wish I knew," he mumbled. He tried not to think too much about what Piper could be going through. She could be perfectly safe, just out of contact. He could be using Xandra's help for no reason at all. Not that he had even the slimmest hope that that was true. Piper was in danger. He could feel it. It was something short of a premonition, but a definite sensing of trouble. That feeling was the only thing that allowed him to do what he was about to do.

"Here," he said, handing Xandra the book that he had brought for her.

Her smile was beaming brighter than any of the candles in her shop. "'Morder's Book of Magic,'" she read off the cover. "Only one known copy left in existence. Held safely in the library of Magic School. Until now."

"Remember, it's only on loan," Leo said. "I expect it back next week."

"Yes," she said. "I know how libraries work."

"Very funny," Leo said, though he was far from being amused. Leo had to get permission from the school librarian to have the book removed from Magic School. He could have simply used his role as the headmaster to tell her to give him the book, but Leo didn't want to go throwing around his new title. Instead, he had told her that it was for a special research project he was working on. He hadn't really been on the job long enough to earn her trust and let her know the truth. Not that he was doing anything trustworthy with the book at the moment. He had hardly wanted to tell Nisha what he was doing, but he needed someone on his side.

Leo hadn't bothered to ask Xandra what she intended to use the book for. It was better for him not to know. But, he had first confirmed that there weren't any deadly spells in the book. Mostly it was minor conjurings, but there was more than enough in there for a witch of Xandra's stripe to cause some mischief.

"I have your word that you are not going to use this book to harm anyone?" Leo asked, not for the first time.

"Witch's honor," she said, resting her right hand on her face and placing a finger beneath each eye. The *Bewitched* reference wasn't lost on Leo, but he wasn't exactly in a jovial mood.

"Now, where's the—"

She held up a hand. "Patience. Patience. Are you sure you don't want to have a sit-down? Catch up on old . . . oh, but your wife may be in danger. How forgetful of me." Leo tried to maintain his composure as she turned to the nearest shelf. She picked up a small velvet pouch and handed it to him. "One sliver of pure unicorn horn."

Leo immediately opened the drawstring and examined the contents, holding it up to what little light was available. The piece of horn was small, but it looked like what she said it was.

"Where's the trust, I ask you?" Xandra said with an exaggerated pout. "Fine. You have enough magic there to conjure one spell. Better make it a good one."

Leo shook his head in resignation. He couldn't believe he was turning over Morder's Book of Magic to Xandra for only enough magic to do one spell.

"I could be persuaded to give you some more horn," she teased, as if she had read his mind.

But Leo didn't need to read her mind to know what she was implying. "I am not going to give you the Book of Shadows," he said.

"What give?" she said, in mock surprise. "I just want a little peek. To browse. That's all."

Leo pocketed the small velvet pouch. "It was good seeing you again, Xandra."

"The pleasure was all yours," she replied with a flirtatious smile.

Chapter 6

Phoebe prepared to defend herself from whatever was coming through the door. She wanted to lash out at her captor, but knew that would do no good. Until she learned what was on the other side of the door, there was little reason for her to try to escape. She could only wind up going from a frying pan to a fire situation.

Speaking of fires, she thought as she saw the man coming into the room.

It was not the crazy-looking older man she had last seen before she had been knocked unconscious in the Manor. This was an entirely different demon altogether. And he was hot.

Dark hair and strong masculine features highlighted the looks of the attractive man coming through the door. She couldn't help but notice a passing resemblance to her former demon love, Cole. But this man was like Cole times ten. He was everything she'd ever wanted in a guy, at least as it pertained to looks. She was

literally frozen in her tracks at the pure beauty of the man and couldn't even move as he closed the door behind him.

The sound of the lock clicking back into place pulled Phoebe out of her reverie. Her new visitor hadn't been the one to lock the door. Someone else was still out in the hall.

"Who are you?" she asked, taking a moment to regain her composure. There was something about this guy that was clouding her mind. It was more than just the piercing blue eyes and sparkling white smile. That much, she knew. If only she could stop staring into those eyes, maybe she'd have a chance to figure it out.

"A friend," he said. It was just the vague kind of answer she had been expecting, yet she didn't mind in the least.

Phoebe gave her head a shake and put some distance—and several pieces of furniture—between herself and the demon. *If he is, in fact, a demon. He could be just a man. There may not be any magic at work here.*

Clearly, the distance wasn't helping.

"Look, *friend*, I don't know what kind of mojo you're working on me, but it's not going to do any good. Now, I want to see your boss."

"I work for no one," the demon said. Though he kept his distance, Phoebe could still feel the figurative pull of attraction. She was surprised to find herself taking quite a literal step toward him. "But, if you mean our host . . . well, he

is otherwise engaged at the moment."

"With my sisters?" Phoebe asked. "What have you done with Piper and Paige?"

The demon moved over to the bar and starting mixing a pair of drinks. Phoebe wasn't sure which was more presumptuous: the fact that he didn't bother to ask her what she wanted, or the idea that he actually thought she would drink anything that he gave her. "I do not know of anyone with those names." he replied.

"Are there other rooms in this house?" she asked. "Is this even a house?"

He simply smiled as he dropped olives into their martinis and handed one to her.

Phoebe didn't bother to raise a hand to take the glass. "You've got to be kidding."

He smiled again and took a sip from his drink. "You should try it. It's delicious."

Part of her did want to taste the drink . . . and the demon as well. But the logical part of her saw through the haze of whatever spell he was weaving and put even more distance between them. She only wished the room could have been larger.

Phoebe preoccupied her mind with thoughts of her sisters, reminding herself of the danger they were probably in. She was likely in the same amount of danger, no matter how plush her surroundings or how handsome her visitor. The distraction seemed to be working. With each new image she forced herself to face, she had one less thought of joining the demon for a drink.

The smile on the demon's face faltered slightly. *He's probably not used to rejection,* Phoebe thought. *Or he can read my mind.*

Can you? she thought.

But the demon did not respond. Not that that proved anything. She still kept her guard up. At the same time, Phoebe realized that she was going about this all wrong. She had been trying to stay away from the demon, afraid that the proximity would increase his allure. She knew that was true just by how much it helped to be a few feet away, but that wasn't the point. She wasn't going to learn anything from him this way. If, in fact, he *could* read her mind, maybe it was time for her to try the same thing on him.

"Okay, fine," she said, taking a step forward. She didn't want to come across as too eager, lest he not fall for her act. "We'll do this your way. What is it you want me to do?"

"I want you to have a drink," he said, holding the glass out to her again. She had to admit that she was thirsty, but alcohol—whether it was poisoned or not—wasn't going to be helpful in keeping a clear head.

"I don't drink," she said.

"Come now," he replied. "We both know that's not true."

Phoebe looked at the demon's face again. Did he know her? Did she know him? The only familiarity she saw were the features that reminded her

of Cole. And those she would have remembered if she had seen them before.

She had unconsciously taken another couple steps toward the demon. "I'm not really in the mood," she said, referring to more than just the drink.

"That's understandable," he replied, taking a sip from his glass, then putting them both down. Phoebe assumed that he was trying to show her that the drinks were safe. It didn't matter. She had other things on her mind.

Phoebe closed the distance between them. She could feel the pull of attraction. There was something about the demon. Either his scent, or his eyes. He had a power over Phoebe. It was all she could do to resist it.

"What do you want to do?" he asked seductively. Actually, everything that he did could be described as "seductively." From the way he spoke, to the angle he tilted his head, to his crooked smile. Every aspect of him seemed poised to evoke a specific response from Phoebe.

"I think you know," she said, pretending to fall for his act. It wasn't a difficult facade for her to master.

"I think I do," he said.

She let him kiss her. Not that it required much permission at this point. She wanted him to kiss her. But, at the same time, she didn't want him to touch her. The kiss filled her with a confusing combination of passion and disgust.

She didn't want to be near him, but she didn't want to pull away.

The kiss also filled her with images; premonitions. That had been her plan all along. Her powers of premonition didn't always work when she touched a person, but somehow she knew they would with him. Still, she hadn't needed to kiss him to see anything. A simple brush against his hand would have been enough.

But what fun would that have been, she justified as she gave in to his kiss. The images that filled her mind were passionate and intense. They were also very, very wrong.

Once the premonition was over, she managed to pull herself away. Premonitions tended to hit her strongly, but she had never experienced that kind of intensity before. It was almost overwhelming. What she read in the demon's face afterward told her that he knew exactly what he had been doing. She was then stuck with the immediate thought that she wanted to smack the smug look off the demon's face.

So she did.

Paige was tired of the limited amount of pacing she could do in her invisible cell. She had been up and down a dozen times in the past half hour. It didn't help that her two keepers were just standing there watching and waiting for her to do something. She almost felt like they were judging

her and her lack of ability to do anything interesting. *I'm never going to a zoo again,* she thought, wondering if there was some invisible "Do Not Feed the Animals" sign outside her own prison.

If she could find a weakness in the energy barrier, she might be able to exploit it and orb out. Her two prior attempts had resulted in jarring electrical shocks, so she wasn't exactly looking to repeat the experience. But that didn't mean she just should stand around doing nothing.

Paige looked down at her vest. The buttons stared back up at her. *Sometimes fashion sacrifices need to be made for the greater good,* she thought.

Taking a seat, Paige began to carefully work at the bottom-most button on her black vest. There was no need to ruin the entire outfit. A single button would do for what she had in mind. After a few seconds, she had managed to snap the threads and pull off the button. She looked over at Frick and Frack. Neither of them seemed the least bit concerned about the prospect of ever escaping. She hoped that didn't change anytime soon.

Turning to the side so she was facing neither of her guards directly, Paige threw the button at the invisible barrier. It arced through the air before hitting the energy wall, sending out sparks and ricocheting back at her. The button landed about a foot to her right with a plinking sound. The button was a little singed, but hardly the worse for wear.

Neither Frick nor Frack had moved from their positions. They reminded her of the Queen's Guard outside Buckingham Palace, in London. They were so frozen in their stances that she figured an earthquake wouldn't move them.

All the better for me, she thought as she continued her work.

Paige repeated her test, throwing the button higher up the barrier, looking for weak spots. The button's trajectory rose from floor to ceiling with each throw, snapping back at her with a zap as it hit the barrier. Once she reached the top of the barrier, Paige shifted a few inches to her right and started again.

Over and over, she threw the button at the barrier, while Frick and Frack continued to ignore her in their frozen poses.

Throw-zap-plink. Throw-zap-plink. Throw-zap-plink.

The repetitive motion grew hypnotic, with only minor breaks when she had to choose another button because the previous one had gotten too singed to use any longer. Then, finally, on her second-from-last button, she was jolted from the hypnosis when she threw the button and heard neither a zap nor a plink.

Paige snapped to attention and saw that the button was lying on the ground several feet beyond where she knew the barrier extended. She had found a hole in the barrier. Frick and Frack looked as if they hadn't noticed either.

They continued to stare at some nonexistent point in the room. This put Paige on immediate alert. She couldn't have lucked out to get such oblivious guards. Something had to be up.

Paige looked over at the guard she called Frack. He was definitely the more imposing of the two, with his muscles on top of muscles bulging out of his tight, weathered shirt. Frack wasn't moving at all. In fact, he didn't even seem to be breathing—not that all demons needed to breathe air, but most did. That didn't tell her anything, but she was searching her memory to see if she recalled either of her guards moving once since she had woken up. She couldn't remember. Either way, she didn't need to worry. They hadn't reacted yet. That was all that mattered. If she could focus her orb on that weak spot, she could slip out undetected and pop home to get help.

Without giving her guards a second glance, Paige transported herself out of her invisible prison. The blue-white orbs headed for the button-size hole, and passed through the barrier without incident. But when Paige's body reformed, she was not standing in the Manor's living room as she had intended. She was looking right into the eyes of the female guard, the one she had named Frick.

Before Paige could react, Frick held up her hand and sent a blast of energy at Paige. The blast lifted Paige off her feet and threw her

several yards into the room. Her back slammed into the energy barrier, and she fell to the floor. The last thing Paige saw before she fell unconscious was the female demon, standing at attention by the door, looking as if nothing had just happened at all.

Piper was quite pleased with her progress. The lab was a shambles. No beaker, test tube, or Bunsen burner had gone untouched. Shards of glass and twisted metal littered the room. The noise and destruction hadn't succeeded in bringing anyone in to check on her, but Piper felt no small amount of satisfaction over the damage she had caused. The only problem was that she had run out of things to destroy. It seemed a cruel irony to her that the only thing in the room that had been impervious to her powers was the cage she was still trapped inside.

Now that she had worked out some of her aggression, Piper tried looking at her situation with a calmer eye. It hadn't really changed much. The cage itself was quite formidable. It held firm against both her magical and manual attacks. Repeated kicks at the door had only succeeded in causing her legs pain.

There was nothing inside the cage that she could use to help pry the lock. None of the destruction from outside the cage had flown her way. In fact, in all the explosions, it seemed like the debris was almost consciously staying away

from her to avoid giving her a weapon or lock pick. There was nothing within arm's reach, either. It was just her and the cage . . . and a massive amount of unreachable debris.

The only thing missing is one of those spinning metal wheels, Piper thought as she took in her surroundings. Not even curtains or a fresh coat of paint could brighten it up. She still felt like a lab rat, and was pretty sure that that was her captor's intention. She figured she'd find out soon enough as the metal door to the lab was slowly opening.

Before Piper could react, the bars around her flashed bright red. She could feel a wave of heat burst from them before they returned to the cool silver they had been before. She didn't have time to worry what that was about as her captor—or someone—was coming through the door. Piper braced for an attack as much as she could from her position behind bars. Little did she realize that the only attack she was about to have was an attack of the giggles.

The man—or demon/man—who entered was really taking the lab rat idea to the extreme. He looked just like the typical mad scientist from any B-movie Piper had ever tried to avoid when Leo got the pick for movie night. Bushy gray hair that could give Einstein a run for his money, ill-fitting outfit beneath a white lab coat, and a pair of Coke-bottle glasses that magnified his already freaky-looking eyes were only the tip of

this iceberg. The demon moved with a manic pace, taking short, rapid strides as he approached her cage, rubbing his hands together. His mouth had a slight twitch, like a rodent.

More important than his physical description, Piper couldn't help but notice the two dozen keys on a key chain hooked on to his belt loop. If only she could reach those keys, she might be able to get out of her cage.

"Perfect. Perfect. Perfect," he said as he eyed Piper from outside the bars.

Piper grimaced. "Thanks. And you are?"

The demon's eyes went wide, which was saying something, considering how they already filled the frames of his glasses. "Why, Dr. Gnivik, of course." He pointed to the rectangular name badge on his chest. "That's Gnivik. The G isn't silent."

"G-naturally," Piper mumbled. "Look, what say we cut to the chase. Whatever it is you want to do to me and my sisters—kill us, take our powers—it's all been done before. Multiple times. We'll win. You'll lose. Your butt will be vanquished. So, in the interest of time, and saving your own life, what say you let me and my sisters go?"

The *doctor* removed his glasses and put them to his mouth. He looked to be considering Piper's idea, which she found surprising, to say the least. Finally, he removed the glasses from his mouth and held them out at her, gesturing. "You really are a remarkable subject."

"Flatterer," Piper said through clenched teeth.

Gnivik put his glasses back on his face, magnifying his eyes by 50 percent, again. "No, I do believe I am going to keep you around. Run some tests. See what we can learn about the Charmed Ones."

"What kind of tests?" Piper asked.

"The usual," Gnivik replied. "Dunking you to see if you float. Trial by fire. Poking you with pins and other sharp objects."

Piper was too stunned for words. She looked at the mark on her inner arm. Had he already begun his weird experiments?

The doctor's face broke into an inhumanly large grin. "Oh, I made a funny," he said to no one in particular. "I guess I do have a sense of humor."

"What are you talking about?"

"The look on your face was priceless," he said. "Don't worry, the tests I have in mind have much more basis in scientific research."

"What if I refuse to play along?" Piper asked.

"Now that wouldn't matter at all," he said, "as the tests have already begun."

Chapter 7

"Well?" Nisha said as soon as Leo crossed through the front door.

He held up the sliver of unicorn horn.

"That's it?" she asked. "You traded Morder's Book of Magic for *that*? She couldn't have spared a little bit more?"

"Look, I realize that for someone with powers, this seems like nothing special, but unicorn horn is the most pure form of magic. This little sliver will be enough to let me cast one powerful spell. Something that even the teachers at Magic School can't do. Something that could equal the Power of Three."

Nisha picked the piece of horn out of Leo's hand. "So much power in such an itty-bitty package."

"Yes," he said, carefully taking it back and dropping it in the pouch. The last thing they needed was to lose it between the floorboards.

"Okay, so what are you going to do with it?"

"Damned if I know."

Leo took the horn upstairs to the attic to keep it safe. He needed some time alone with his thoughts, anyway. Nisha had been kind enough to clean up a little while he had been gone. He knew she was continuing while he was up there thinking. Leo was glad that she had found a way to keep herself busy. He didn't want her any more involved than he had already made her.

Nisha was a good kid and had a lot of power in her own right. She could really help him out in this situation, if only she knew how to use her power in more practical demon-fighting ways. That was the main problem with the teachers at Magic School. They were all very good at theory, but not very experienced with practical application. Piper and her sisters hadn't been prepared at all when they had started battling demons, but they were pretty much thrown into the fight against their will. At least the Elders had sent Leo to watch over them. That avenue was clearly closed to him now. He was on his own.

But how was one mortal with one spell at his disposal supposed to identify and track a demon threat? Sure, it could be done, but he had his sons to think about. Leo couldn't just go off on his own on a demon hunt and leave Wyatt and Chris at Magic School to be raised by the staff if he went and got himself killed. As much as he was willing to take the risk with his own life to save his wife, Leo knew that he couldn't risk

leaving his sons orphaned. He needed experienced demon fighters on his side if he was going to find the Charmed Ones.

Suddenly, he knew his plan. The two ideas had come together so naturally that he didn't know why he hadn't thought of it from the start. Leo rushed to the Book of Shadows and opened it to Piper's most recent entry. The answer was right there on the page in front of him. All he needed to do was activate the unicorn horn.

Leo riffled through the shelves beside the pedestal the book was kept on. He only needed one ingredient to complete the spell to activate the magic. And that ingredient was kept in the kitchen, so long as it hadn't been destroyed in the demon attacks.

Leaving the unicorn horn safely behind with the other ingredients, Leo hurried downstairs to the kitchen. He was careful not to disturb Nisha as she straightened up the conservatory. The jar of rosemary was still in one piece, stored safely in the back of the kitchen cabinet. He had been lucky, too. It seemed like most of the contents of the cabinet had been destroyed the night before. Leo pocketed the rosemary and tried to make his way back to the attic quietly, before Nisha could ask him what he was up to, but the girl apparently had the radar of a bat in addition to her impressive healing skills. She was waiting for him at the bottom of the steps.

"I take it you've had an idea," she said.

"Yes," he replied as he tried to push past her.

"And the reason you're not sharing it?" she asked.

Leo considered his options. He had wasted enough time already. Best-case scenario: Piper was trapped somewhere in the Underworld, trying to get back to her family. He didn't want to think about the worst-case scenario. It had been hours since she had disappeared. Now that he finally had a plan of action, he didn't want to wait another second.

"It's pretty clear that whatever evil we're up against, we're going to need some help," he said.

"And what am I? Chopped liver?"

"Do you feel that you're ready to go up against an Upper-Level Demon? Like Zankou?"

"Point taken," she said, shrinking back at the idea. "But we don't know that he's involved."

Leo took the opportunity to rush past her and head upstairs. "Still, we need people with powers and experience in this area. People who know what they're doing."

"Who you gonna call?" she asked, and then groaned at her own joke as she followed him.

"My sons."

Nisha stopped at the top step. "You want your babies to battle evil?"

"Well, they've done it before," Leo said as he kept walking. "But I didn't mean the babies."

"What did you mean?" Nisha asked, following him again.

"Just the other day, Piper cast a spell that brought Wyatt back from the future," he explained as they went up the attic stairs. "Her spell had been an accident, but I'm pretty sure I can re-create it and call both my sons from the future to help with this problem."

Again, Nisha stopped in place. "I'd like to formally go on the record that I am against this plan."

"There is no record, Nisha," Leo said as he started mixing ingredients in a small cauldron the girls kept in the attic for just such an occasion. "It's just you and me. If it weren't just you and me, I wouldn't have to do this."

"Still, I don't think it's a good idea." Nisha said. "I may be new to Magic School, but I'm pretty sure that one of the first lessons we teach is about using magic for personal gain. Then there's that whole messing with the time line thing. That's got to be a lesson, too. If not, we really need to add it to the syllabus."

"Saving the Charmed Ones is not, technically, personal gain," Leo explained. "We use magic all the time to get out of trouble."

"But you don't necessarily know they're in trouble," Nisha said.

"Piper would never go off without letting me know where she is," Leo said. "She wouldn't just abandon the boys. Not for an entire day."

"Okay," Nisha ceded. "And the time line thing?"

"Technically speaking, we're not messing with the time line since the future hasn't happened yet."

"Well, there's some circuitous logic."

"Maybe. But it's also true," Leo said. "Now, unless you want to go with me to the Underworld and rescue the Charmed Ones . . ."

"I'll add the mandrake root," Nisha said as she picked up the root and sprinkled it into the pot she and Leo were standing over.

Leo took the unicorn horn out of the small pouch that Xandra had given him. He examined it one last time with his naked eye. It looked like what she had claimed it was. There was just no way to be sure she had been honest with him. Xandra was rarely honest with anyone. All he had to do was add the unicorn horn to the mixture and cast his spell. However, there were several substances that would cause the potion they made to explode. For Leo, it was worth the risk, but he didn't want to endanger Nisha.

Nisha seemed to sense what he was thinking. "You sure you don't want me to just use my power to cast the spell?" she asked. "I could probably do it without that silly little trinket."

"I don't want to risk it," he said. "We're brining back powerful magic users. My personal link is the only thing that ensures we'll do this right. Otherwise, they might be able to ignore the call."

"Well, that would be rude."

"Yes, it would," Leo said with a smile as he

held the unicorn horn over the potion. Nisha had been great at lightening the tension, considering how dire the circumstances were. "You might want to move back a few steps."

Nisha leaned to the side, like she was about to move, but stayed firmly planted beside him. "And who's going to protect you if that thing blows up in your face?" she asked. "You can't miraculously heal yourself, you know."

Leo did know. He regretted his loss of abilities and, once again, lamented the fact that he needed someone else to rescue him. At the same time, he was glad that he had such a loyal teacher, and a new friend, available to him. He only wished that he wasn't about to do something that could blow her up.

"Here we go," he said as he dropped the shaving into the potion. The reaction was immediate. The potion turned from bloodred to deep blue. It began to swirl in the counterclockwise direction. A scent of lavender emanated from the bowl, in spite of the fact that that was not one of the ingredients. When the swirling potion seemed to hit maximum speed, Leo chanted the spell that he had hastily altered from the Book of Shadows:

Help this father save his wife,
So they can live a happy life.
To ensure that this is done,
Send, from the future, both his sons.

The rhyme pattern was a little Pollyanna-esque (and a little off), but Leo hoped that it would work. He based the spell on one Piper had cast a few days ago. Though her intention had only been to get Wyatt to speak, the unintended reaction of bringing an older Wyatt back from the future was exactly what Leo wanted to happen here. Piper's spell had been immediate, but Leo's was having some kind of delay. He hoped it was just because he was using an outside source of magic to enact his spell. That suspicion seemed to be proven correct when he saw a change come over the potion.

The potion stopped swirling and immediately froze over. In the ice that had formed on top, Leo saw his grown sons, Wyatt and Chris, in the midst of a demon battle. There was a dark-haired girl with the boys that Leo didn't recognize. Something about the way she moved reminded him of Piper, but he didn't get to witness her actions for long. The image froze, like the ice that had formed over the potion. The battle was locked in time, much like Piper's own power worked. But it did not remain frozen for long. A blue glow encased the boys until they burst into dozens of orbs and arrived in the attic, looking confused, but none the worse for wear.

"Cool," Nisha said.

"Dad?" Wyatt and Chris said in unison.

"What are we doing here?" Chris asked.

"I've got a problem I need some help with." Leo said.

"You've got to send us back," Wyatt said. "We can't just leave Mel—"

"We were in the middle of fighting a demon," Chris interrupted.

"It's okay," Leo said. "We can send you back to the moment we took you from. This is important."

But Chris didn't seem to be listening. He was too busy looking at Nisha, then around the attic, and then back at Nisha. "Where's Mom?" he asked.

"That's what I want to talk to you about," Leo said. He quickly updated his sons on the situation as he understood it. There wasn't much to tell, considering he didn't really know anything and he had to gloss over the part about making a deal with a trader in the Black Magic Market.

"Dad, we can't just go messing with the time line," Wyatt said once his father was done bringing them up to date.

"See, I told you," Nisha said. "Rules."

Leo ignored her. He had already worked this one out in his head. "Who's to say we're not doing something that wasn't already meant to happen?"

"You want to run that one by us again?" Chris asked.

"What do you two know about this time period?" Leo asked.

"You know we can't tell you that," Wyatt said.

"Okay, but did we ever tell you anything about your mother and your aunts being abducted by some demon with a video camera after I fell from grace?" Leo asked.

"No," Wyatt said.

Chris shook his head, agreeing with his brother.

Leo was relieved to hear that. It was the one part of his plan that he couldn't anticipate. If his sons had known about this in their history, he wouldn't have been able to ask them to change anything. They could be risking their future.

"That means one of two things," Leo said. "Either this didn't happen in your time line, or it did and I called you back from the future to help in the first place."

"But how could you call us back from the future before the future even existed?" Wyatt asked.

"And how can he do it now?" Chris said. "Look, time travel makes about as much sense as an Escher painting. If Mom's in trouble, that's all I need to hear. I'm in."

"I like this one. He's cute," Nisha said before her face flashed in shock. "Except when you realize he's the baby whose diaper I just helped change back in Magic School. Ew. That is an ew, right? This is weird."

"Who is this person talking about my diapers?" Chris asked.

"This is Nisha," Leo said. "One of the teachers at Magic School."

"Well, I guess that answers my question about career longevity," Nisha said. "Seeing as how your sons don't even know me . . . or did something worse happen? Am I dead? Wait, I don't want to know."

"We couldn't tell you, anyway," Wyatt said.

"Oh," she said with a sigh. "Because you don't know me . . . or you don't *want* to tell me because it would mess with the time line. I knew it. I'm dead. I should have listened to Mom and become a lawyer. I could have a nice law practice with nice mortal clients."

"I'm sorry," Chris interrupted. "Why is she here?"

"Nisha has to guard the Manor while we look for your mother."

"I have to *what*?"

Leo turned to Nisha. "We can't leave the Manor unoccupied while we're out. In case Zankou makes another attempt to get inside. He could still be the evil behind this whole thing. But either way, we can't just leave the Manor empty."

"And you expect me to be able to stop him?" Nisha asked, pacing the attic. Leo knew that he was asking a lot of the young witch, but he didn't have much of a choice. "At least leave me one of the boys."

"Nisha, you'll be fine," Leo said. "The Manor has some pretty powerful defenses of its own."

"It does?" Wyatt and Chris said.

Nisha looked at Leo with suspicion in her eyes.

"Well, it sort of does, but Zankou probably won't try anything if he thinks everyone's home," Leo said.

"That's reassuring," Nisha said, "Except . . . not. And what if Zankou is behind all this and knows the Charmed Ones are MIA."

"Then he would have tried something by now and we'd be overrun by demons," Leo said as he mounted the stairs.

"That's not very reassuring," Nisha said.

"Sorry, it's the best I can do in this case," Leo said as he started out of the attic. "Come on, boys, we've got work to do."

But his sons remained where they were standing. "Um . . . do we know where we're going or what we're going to do?" Chris asked.

"What?" Leo said. "Do I have to think of everything?"

Chapter 8

For the second time that day, Paige regained consciousness while lying in the middle of the energy barrier. At least this time she already knew about the invisible field, so she didn't have to experience the jolt of pain again. Neither of her guards had moved from their positions, but she swore that she saw the female guard had a look of smug satisfaction on her face. Or that could have just been Paige's interpretation. She was getting mighty annoyed.

Paige sat up in her invisible prison. She assumed that she was still in prison, that is. The barrier could have been taken down while she was out for all she knew. But she wasn't about to test it out. So, she sat in solitary silence wondering whether or not she was in an invisible cage.

Someone was playing mind games with her; trapping her in the middle of a large room under the watchful eyes of two guards that barely moved and hardly reacted to her. There had

been no weak spot in the barrier. That had been done intentionally. They wanted her to attempt the escape, just to mess with her. She had no doubt about that.

But, why?

If only she had an idea of who her captor was, it might give her some insight into the fiend's thought processes. At the very least it would free her mind to concentrate entirely on escape. She kept going back to wondering who was behind all this. If it was some demon she and her sisters had dealt with before, or some new evil intent on destroying the Charmed Ones as so many had tried to do before.

Usually by this point her abductor would make himself known, if only to gloat over her and drone on about his perceived natural superiority. But, so far, she had been left relatively alone to plot escape attempts. It was possible that it was exactly what her captor wanted her to do. Considering that her guards were doing nothing but watching her, it was also possible that they were doing their jobs. She looked around for another cameraman but didn't see anyone watching her. That didn't mean she wasn't under surveillance. Paige wondered if maybe it was time to give whoever was watching a show.

"Hey, Frick," she called out to the female guard. "Nice move with the power push. Is that all you do, though? Blow hot air at people? Can't

say it's mighty useful. And how about your friend over there?" She turned to the big, burly guard. "What's your power? Death glare? 'Cause I gotta say, it's not really working."

The big guy continued to glare at her. At least now he was glaring at *her*, instead of some imaginary point above her head. She considered that a fair amount of progress.

Paige chatted on for another few minutes, hoping to get a rise out of either of the guards. She was beginning to wonder if they were robots. Whatever they got paid, it was certainly worth it. Department store mannequins moved more than they did. Then again, it was a pretty cushy job, stand around doing nothing and get paid for it. That is, assuming they got paid. Paige wasn't sure what passed as demon commerce down here.

Eventually, Paige grew tired of listening to her own voice and figured it was time for another escape attempt, if only to break up the monotony. A visual scan of the room gave her nothing new to work with. It was pretty basic, with only two open exits. There wasn't even a loose rock or light fixture she could focus on. In fact, there didn't seem to be a light source in the room at all, which was certainly interesting but fairly useless for her at the moment.

When she exhausted any options in the room, she turned her attention to the guards. Both Frick and Frack had silver-hilted daggers jutting

out of their belts that Paige thought she could make use of. She had been so focused on getting out of the barrier that she hadn't even thought about whether or not anything could get in. It was worth a try..

Paige turned to the male guard and held out her hand. "Dagger!"

The dagger at his waist burst into a swirl of orbs that flew toward her, passing through the barrier and landing in her open palm. The orbs reformulated into the dagger. Paige closed her hand around the hilt. Success! Such as it was. Now that she had the dagger, there was nothing she could really do with it, other than enjoy the surprise on Frack's face over her being able to disarm him. Too bad there was no reaction beyond the surprise.

Neither Frack nor Frick made a move on her. They didn't try to retrieve the weapon. They didn't even take a step in her direction. In fact, beyond the initial surprise, there wasn't much of a reaction at all from either guard.

Frustrated by the lack of response, Paige got angry and lashed out in the only way she could: She threw the dagger at the energy barrier. She immediately realized her mistake and ducked for cover, fearing it would bounce back at her.

The dagger did not rebound, though. The blade froze midair as it connected with the energy barrier. Sparks of electricity shot out of the blade's tip. The entire barrier around her

began to glow. This got the attention of both guards. The woman reached for her dagger while her weaponless companion balled his fists in preparation for an attack. Paige readied herself for whatever was about to happen.

The glowing barrier melted around her from the ceiling to the floor. As the dagger dropped, Paige considered making a move for it, but knew she couldn't get to the weapon in time. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the female guard's dagger flying toward her.

Without thinking—and without a specific destination in mind—Paige orbed herself out of the room, unsure of where she would turn up.

Phoebe felt a great sense of satisfaction over the red welt she had left on the handsome demon's cheek. She hoped for a bruise to mar his stunningly beautiful face. If only she had been wearing a ring that could have cut him and left a scar. It served him right for the images that had flooded her mind.

She hadn't seen a premonition when she touched him . . . when she kissed him. She knew that much was true. The images she had seen of herself in the throes of passion with the demon had been manufactured. He had fed her a future that he wanted to see come true. Phoebe wasn't sure how she knew this, but there was no doubt in her mind. Aside from the fact that she had no interest in this demon,

there was something off about the premonition. It seemed forced. It had not come to her naturally. There was no doubt of that.

The demon didn't react the way she had expected either. He didn't lash out at her. He didn't even laugh at her to show her how little he cared about her attack. If anything, he looked hurt by the slap, both physically and emotionally.

The demon rubbed his cheek. "That wasn't nice," he said. "Though I guess I may be partially to blame. Things have gone and gotten all physical between us and we still haven't properly introduced ourselves." He tried to take her hand, but she slapped him away.

Again, he looked more hurt than anything, but he tried to cover it. "My name is Cameron, but you can call me Cam. And you, of course, are Phoebe Halliwell, one of the Charmed Ones and a pretty good kisser."

"What were those images I saw?" Phoebe asked.

"Let's just call it the movie of my mind," Cam said. "Would you like to play it out in real life?"

Phoebe shuddered, partially because she was horrified by the suggestion and partially because she wanted to. "No!" she said, a little too quickly.

"Ah, your mouth says no, but your . . . well, every other part of you says . . ." He trailed off, letting the accusation linger as his fingers traced her lips.

Phoebe pulled away. She was tired of falling for his pheromones or whatever demon aphrodisiac seemed to be emanating from his pores. Her mind was clear enough to know not to trust him. If only the rest of her body could do the same.

"I don't want to rush you," Cam said, taking a seat on the daybed. "We have all the time in the world. It is just the two of us, as you can see."

"Actually, I can't see," Phoebe said. "Are we alone? Were you the one that brought me here? You mention our host, well, where is he? Is he watching us right now? Through that mirror, for example?" She pointed to the enormous silver-framed mirror hanging above the fireplace.

"So many questions," Cam said.

"That's what usually happens when I wake up in a strange place with an even stranger man."

"You cut me to the quick," Cam said, mocking her. "I wish you could trust me."

"I've been kidnapped," she said. "That isn't exactly the best basis for trust."

Cam looked deeply into her eyes. "But you *can* trust me," he whispered.

And in that moment, Phoebe knew that she could. It made no sense at all. Her brain was screaming at her that this was part of his power, yet at the same time, she wanted to believe him. She needed to believe him.

It was all so overwhelming, Phoebe had to

take a seat on the daybed. Cam moved toward her. When she did not push him away, he took that as permission to sit.

"I know I came on strong," Cam said, softly. "I'm sorry. This is overwhelming. Trust me, I know."

She leaned forward to whisper in his ear. The passion she felt for him was almost overwhelming now that they were close again. "You're a prisoner here too, aren't you?"

Cam seemed to be taken off guard. He paused, contemplating what she had said.

"It's okay," she whispered, giving him a soft kiss on the lips in case they were being watched. "You can trust me, too. Help get me out of this room and we can escape."

Finally, Cam replied, whispering in her ear as she leaned into his strong body, "It's too dangerous. You don't know how long I've been here, what I've been forced to do."

Phoebe felt pity for the demon, mixed in with the lust. She knew the lust had been manufactured, but the other emotions were genuine. He was a victim, too. "It's okay," she said gently. "We can make it right."

"The fireplace," he said. "There's a secret exit. It will take us out of the cave."

"Where does it lead?"

"I don't know. The last . . . guest used it. She never returned. Our captor told me she had died trying to escape, but I don't believe him."

"Who's holding us here?" Phoebe said. "What does he want?"

"He's a lunatic," Cam whispered. "Calls himself a doctor, but . . ."

"It's okay," Phoebe said, wondering what the demon was a doctor of. "How do we get through the fire?"

"Just walk through it," Cam said. "It's fake. Like everything in this room. Including me."

"Don't say that," she said, kissing him now because she wanted to, not just to cover their conversation. Actually, she was pretty sure the kiss was a result of his powers too, but she didn't feel as much of a need to struggle now. "You're doing good when it counts. How do we get to the fireplace without rousing suspicion?"

"We're not being watched," Cam said. "We're being recorded. The doctor doesn't go over the tapes until after I leave the room. He says he doesn't want me to feel inhibited knowing I have a live audience."

"You're right," Phoebe said. "He is a lunatic."

Cameron laughed. It made Phoebe feel even better.

Phoebe reluctantly pulled herself away from her gentleman caller. Now that she felt genuine emotions for him, his manufactured powers over her were incredibly overwhelming. She now wanted to do all those things she had seen in her "premonition." Phoebe reminded herself that this situation was no way to begin a relationship,

especially with a demon who could manipulate emotions. She focused on the fireplace instead.

Should I trust him? she wondered. Everything was happening so quickly.

The fire inside the hearth looked real enough. As she approached, she could feel heat emitting from the flames. She looked back at Cam, trying to determine if he was worthy of her trust. She could still go either way. He was standing a few feet behind her, looking both scared and expectant, like her decision could reverse whatever damage he had done earlier. Phoebe decided that, whether or not she could trust him, she needed to do something. Just standing around in this manufactured room wasn't getting her anywhere. She took a step into the fire.

The heat that she had felt from the flames was gone. Inside the fireplace, the air was cold as ice. She reached out a hand to the brick wall in front of her. Her fingers disappeared into the brick. It was an illusion, just like the fire itself. Phoebe glanced back at Cam. He was right behind her, nodding to her to move ahead. With a shrug, she stepped forward, walking through the fire and into the wall.

"You have been making quite a mess," Dr. Gnivik said to Piper as he adjusted his glasses.

"I don't know," Piper said, surveying her damage. "I kind of like it."

"Well, it just won't do," he said, "won't do at all." With a wave of his hand, all the tables righted themselves. The broken glass rose from the ground. A tornado swept through the room, blowing all the glass back together, re-forming the beakers and test tubes and the huge metal-and-glass contraption that had been at the center of the room. The multicolored chemicals that had spilled about, mixing together and forming a nice sludge all over the room, now separated back into their original colored liquids and poured back into their containers. Those containers took their original positions over the Bunsen burners and metal stands. In under a minute, the room looked exactly as it had when Piper had woken.

The three vials of red liquid were back in position at the center of the makeshift distillery, as if nothing had ever happened to them. The experiment, it seemed, continued, unfazed.

"Much better," Gnivik said as he moved over to the trio of what were presumably blood-filled test tubes. Piper unconsciously rubbed the small puncture wound at the crook of her elbow.

"Very good," Dr. Gnivik said when he saw what she was doing. "Very good indeed. Yes, you have made the connection. I am heating the blood of you and your sisters."

"Well, that makes about as much sense as anything else that's happened to me in the past seven years," Piper mumbled.

"And do you want to know *why* I'm doing it?" Gnivik asked.

"Not particularly," she said, and she meant it, too. She had heard more than enough evil plans in her lifetime. She just wanted to get this over with. *If only I could get to those keys.*

The doctor demon took off his glasses again, to look at her in the gaps between the metal and glass. "You *are* a fun one." He laughed. "If you must know—"

"I just said I don't want to know."

"Well, I need to tell you," he said with glee. "You see, I've heard so much about the Charmed Ones over the years that I began to wonder what it was that made them tick. Why are they *Charmed*, exactly? What is it about the Warren bloodline that makes this particular confluence of sisters the most powerful witches ever? And then, of course, how did that power transfer to your stepsister following the death of Prue? If only I could get a sample of her blood, but ashes to ashes and all."

Piper flinched at the disrespectful mention of her sister. She didn't like that this demon seemed to know so much about her family. She knew that it came with the territory, being the prophesied "Charmed Ones" and all, but it was still unnerving. "You've done your research."

Gnivik twisted his glasses in his hands until the lenses were facing two entirely different directions. "What kind of scientist would I be

if I hadn't?" He released one hand, and the glasses sprang back into shape as if the frames were made of rubber. He slipped them back onto his face.

"Now, what would you like to . . . oh, we did that part. You don't want to know anything," Gnivik said. "Not very curious, are you? Wouldn't make a good scientist."

"Okay, this is getting old." Piper raised her hands, wanting more than ever to make a demon explode. Gnivik didn't even flinch as she directed her power at him. He didn't burst into flames either. That was nothing new. If he was a high enough level demon, it would take more than just Piper's power to vanquish him. Still, she didn't need to simply stand by while his experiment continued.

Piper set about destroying his room again. She knew he could turn everything back as he had before, but if they had to continue this all afternoon, she would. She had no intention of allowing him to experiment on her any further. She focused her power on the test tubes at the center of the distillery, hoping to destroy the blood samples taken from her and her sisters. Maybe if she did that enough times she would alter the experiment. At the very least, it would be entertaining.

But the test tubes did not explode. They didn't even crack.

"Oh, you'll find your powers have left you for

the moment," Gnivik said. "While you're in my lab, I control your access to them. In fact, I even control your powers themselves." The mad scientist pressed a button on the console beside the still. Piper immediately froze in place. She panicked a little, fearing that the demon did have control of her powers. Once the brief panic subsided, logic took over and Piper realized her mistake.

First of all, Piper's power to stop time didn't work on other witches, which meant it couldn't be used against her either. But, more importantly, she wasn't frozen in time so much as she was just frozen. She was still conscious of the world around her and able to see what the demon was doing. When Piper froze someone, they froze entirely, unaware that the rest of the world continued to function. Piper could clearly see that Dr. Gnivik was moving, and what he was doing did not look good for her.

The so-called scientist was following the flowing liquid in his experiment from the vials of blood through the various heating elements and the chemicals being mixed in. It was a confusing hodgepodge of twisting glass that Piper couldn't even begin to make sense of. What was clear was that all the fluids were being collected in a beaker at the end of the still. Gnivik was studying that beaker, waiting for something to happen. From her vantage point, Piper couldn't see anything different, but she guessed that he had achieved his goal.

The doctor slid his glasses down on his nose. He looked at the beaker with his naked eyes. Piper couldn't imagine what he was looking for, or why he wore such thick glasses when he clearly didn't need them. But neither of those issues was remotely as interesting as what he was doing with the beaker.

Gnivik rolled out a small leather pouch that he had taken out from a drawer. Several syringes of various sizes were kept in individual pockets safely within the leather. The doctor was sizing up the different instruments before settling on three of the larger ones. They looked to have the longest needles, too. But Piper could have just been imagining that part because she was already a few steps ahead of the doctor on what he was about to do.

Piper could only watch, frozen in her cage, as the scientist dipped the end of a syringe in the purple liquid that had gathered in the beaker. He gave the needle a little tap for good measure, then walked over to her with the instrument.

Dr. Gnivik removed his glasses, looking straight into her frozen eyes. "I can tell that you caught me in my little lie," he said. "The eyes truly are the window to the soul, and I can see suspicion in yours. Mixed with a healthy dose of fear, too, I assume. No, I don't actually have your powers, but I will get them soon enough."

The doctor pulled her arm through the bars. His keys were so close, but she could do nothing

to take them. Piper was unable to resist as he touched the syringe to her skin in the exact same spot he had presumably withdrawn blood from her earlier. She could feel the metal pierce her vein as a flood of chemicals entered her body. The cool liquid spread up her arm. It was as if someone had poured ice water directly into her veins. She remained frozen on the inside and out as the doctor went back to the table and prepared a second syringe.

"If my calculations are right," he said, "your sisters should be joining us at"—Phoebe and Paige teleported into the cage beside her—"well, here they are now."

Piper couldn't turn to either of her sisters, but she could see enough out of the corner of her eye to know that they were frozen just like she was. All three of them were trapped like lab rats, about to undergo whatever insane experiments the crazy *doctor* had in mind.

Chapter 9

"How's the scrying coming?" Leo asked, leaning over Chris's map.

"It would probably be better if you weren't looking over my shoulder every five seconds, Dad," Chris said.

"He really doesn't like people looking over his shoulder," Wyatt said as he leafed through the Book of Shadows. "Makes him nervous."

"It doesn't make me nervous," Chris said. "It annoys me. Everyone always has to double-check what I'm doing."

Leo quickly backed away. "That wasn't . . . I just feel kind of useless."

"Well, this is pretty useless, too," Chris said, dropping the scrying crystal.

"I thought it would be," Leo said. "The teachers at Magic School have been scrying all day. They didn't turn up anything either. I was just hoping that with your connection to your mother . . ."

"No," Chris said. "It was a good idea. Certainly didn't hurt anything."

There was an awkward silence in the room as Leo searched for something to say to his sons. He had used powerful illegal magic to bring them across time and had pretty much run out of ideas at that point. He felt like a failure as a father, as a husband, and as a protector. Of course, none of his self-pity was helping Piper any at the moment. The three of them stood in silence for a time, with the only sound being the turning pages of the Book of Shadows.

"I brought cookies!" Nisha exclaimed as she came into the attic with a tray loaded with milk and chocolate chip cookies.

Chris looked at the snack. "How old do you think we are?" he asked.

"Oh, cookies," Wyatt said, leaving the book behind and reaching for the sweets.

"Now, don't ruin your—" Leo couldn't even finish his sentence. He was already cracking up, laughing at himself. The boys and Nisha joined in as well. It was just the tension break they had needed.

"It'll be okay, Dad," Chris said gently to his father. "Wyatt and I still have Mom in our future. I'm sure it'll all work out."

"Yes, but bringing you two back has already changed things," Leo said. "Maybe I just made it all worse."

"Oh, enough of the gloom and doom," Nisha

said as she handed a cookie to Chris. "Is he always like this in the future?"

"Not really," Chris said. "But Mom doesn't go missing so much anymore after the ultimate . . . never mind."

"Well, I'm sure we'll find her now and get him back to his normal chipper self," Nisha said, taking a sip of milk.

"I never called him *chipper*," Chris said, smiling.

"It's a shame Benzimar isn't around," Wyatt said through a mouth full of cookie.

Chris dropped his own cookie back on the plate and looked at his brother. "Who says he isn't? Ol' Benji's what? Six hundred years old in our time. He could help us."

"Who's Benzimar?" Leo asked, hopeful, but not trying to get too excited.

"Demon snitch," Wyatt explained. "He's been very helpful in the future . . . or he'll be very helpful in the future. I can never keep the verb tense straight when dealing with time travel. But he's a useful resource."

"And it just costs us some catnip," Chris added.

"Catnip?" Leo said.

"It attracts good luck," Nisha explained. "Also makes my cat, Mr. Whiskers, do backflips."

"Benji thinks he's jinxed," Wyatt explained. "I've never seen him do backflips, though."

"How would we find him now?" Leo asked.

"The Apple," the boys replied.

"It's a demon bar," Wyatt explained. "Been around since the dawn of time."

"Literally," Chris added.

"Then we should go," Leo said as he moved to the attic door. "Nisha, can you keep an eye on things here?"

"That depends," she said. "Are you planning on any demons attacking while you're gone?"

"We don't ever really plan for them," Chris said. "It just seems to happen."

"You'll be fine, Nisha," Leo said, trying to be reassuring. He could tell that she was nervous. That's why he hadn't mentioned anything about demons earlier when he went out on his short errand. But now, he might be gone long enough for it to be a concern. "Just keep the doors locked. If worse comes to worst, grab the Book of Shadows and retreat to Magic School."

"What about the Nexus?" Wyatt asked. "Isn't Zankou trying to get around that this time? If he does—"

Leo cut off his son. "It'll be fine. Nisha, you don't need to take any unnecessary risks. You don't have any experience fighting demons."

"And *you* don't have to remind me of that," she said. "But still . . . I'll do what I can."

"That's all I ask," Leo said.

"But, are you sure you can't leave me Chris?" she asked, causing Leo's youngest son to blush.

"You'll be fine," Leo said as he turned to his grown sons. "Let's not waste any more time."

Wyatt and Chris moved to either side of their father, each taking one of his arms. With a final look to Nisha, the three of them orbed away. A moment later, they reappeared in a dark demon cave outside what appeared to be an Old West saloon, complete with swinging double doors.

"This is The Apple?"

"It doesn't always look like this," Wyatt explained.

"Sometimes it's worse," Chris added. "The place changes almost weekly. The clientele's been around for centuries. I guess they like something to change."

"Last time we were here, it was all mod and trendy," Wyatt explained. "Very *Sex and the City: The New Generation.*"

Leo shrugged and pushed his way inside. He didn't want to even ask about the future of television.

The interior of the bar didn't look any better than the exterior had. In fact, it looked markedly worse. The phrase "a wretched hive of scum and villainy" sprang immediately to mind, but even the *Star Wars* canteen looked high-class compared to this place.

The floorboards didn't so much squeak as moan with each footstep as Leo and his sons entered the bar. There was about an inch of dust and dirt covering everything from the tables, to

the glasses, to the patrons themselves. Even the air seemed dirty, with a haze that made it difficult for Leo to see across the room. That part was especially unnerving. There was no telling what dangers lurked in the corners and deep recesses of the bar.

Leo saw more than a few demon faces he recognized. Some of the demons shied away from his gaze, while others stared openly at him in defiance. He was on their turf and they were letting him know that they were up for a challenge. Leo hoped that word hadn't quite gotten out yet that he had fallen from grace. The last thing he needed was to come under attack. He and the boys were woefully outnumbered.

Mercifully, the demons gave them their space as they entered the bar. Leo assumed that it had as much to do with his relationship to the Charmed Ones as anything. Or maybe they could sense the amount of pure power emanating from Wyatt and Chris. The grown sons of a Charmed One and a Whitelighter were not to be trifled with. Not that any of the demons would know who the boys really were.

"Over there," Wyatt said, and nodded to the far end of the bar.

"Yep, there's Benji," Chris said. "Don't think he's moved off that stool in two decades."

Through the darkened bar interior, Leo could make out an aged demon on the last bar stool in the place, hunched over a steaming drink. He

looked like he had been around for the grand opening of the bar back at the dawn of time. The boys had said that the demon was over six hundred in their time. Leo suspected the demon lied about his age. He didn't look a day under a thousand as far as Leo was concerned.

Leo hung back as they approached, trusting his sons to know the way to mosey on up to the potential snitch.

Wyatt opened up negotiations by plunking a jar of catnip on the bar in front of Benzimar. The demon tried to ignore the gift, but Leo could see that his interest was clearly piqued. The demon's nostrils flared as he tried to inhale the scent through the glass jar.

"Hey, Benji," Chris said. "Long time, no see."

"Do I know you?" The demon asked.

"Not yet," Chris replied. "But someday."

"Until then," Wyatt added, "we'd like to make a little deal. A sort of exchange."

"This here is pure grade, fresh catnip," Chris said. "We'd like to trade it for some information."

Leo enjoyed watching his sons work together. In the year that Chris had lived with him, in the past, there was so much confusion over their relationship, they didn't get to enjoy much in the way of father-son bonding. And in the few times Leo had met future Wyatt, there was hardly any time to actually appreciate the man that his child had become. Of course, those were mostly alternate-future Chris and Wyatt.

There was no telling exactly who they would be in the years to come. But now, seeing them in action, dealing with demons together, made him feel that maybe everything would work out for the better.

"I don't need to be seen helping witches and Whitelighters," Benzimar said.

Leo was surprised to see that the demon had made the boys so quickly.

"He's sensitive," Wyatt explained.

"It's all the catnip," Chris added. "Apparently it clears the sinuses."

"I can sniff out users of good magic from a hundred paces," Benzimar added proudly. "And so can some of the characters around us. Nope. Don't want to be seen helping you out at all."

Leo glanced around the bar and saw that numerous sets of demon eyes were on them now. Both the demons he recognized and ones he had never seen before were taking an active interest in the trio. Leo wasn't sure if they all knew what side he and his sons were on, or if they just looked out of place. Demons all had a certain familiarity in the way they dressed, and Leo's and his sons' use of color in their wardrobes didn't exactly help them blend in.

"We can take care of that," Chris said as he put a hand on the demon's shoulder. Leo felt Wyatt's hand on his own arm as they all orbed into a room that was even darker and dingier than the bar.

"Where are we?" Leo asked.

"Upstairs," Wyatt said. "Benji prefers to do his transactions up here. That way, the other demons know he can't be trusted, but don't know what he's telling people. That way, they try to stay on his good side, but keep their distance at the same time."

"Now, how is it you two seem to know so much about me?" Benji asked as he took a seat in the lone chair in the room. "And I don't know you boys at all."

"Look, we don't have much time," Leo interrupted. He honestly didn't know if they were on a time crunch, but with his wife missing for the better part of a day, it certainly felt that way. "We're looking for information. Can you help us?"

Benzimar eyed the jar of catnip in Wyatt's hand. "Depends on what you want to know about."

"The Charmed Ones," Leo said.

"Ah, now them . . . I don't know all that much about."

Wyatt held up the jar and orbed it away. Leo didn't know where it went, but that didn't matter. The mere disappearance seemed to do the trick.

"Now, why'd you go and do that?" Benji asked. "I said I didn't know *much*. Not that I didn't know *anything*."

The boys shared a smile. Leo assumed they went through similar conversations with this

demon in their time. Without a word, Wyatt orbed the jar back into his hand. Leo found it interesting that his son didn't have to call for items like Paige did. They seemed to come on mental command.

"Have you heard anything about any demons that may be particularly interested in the Charmed Ones right now?" Chris asked.

"About half the demon population is interested in them," the demon said. "The other half is just interested in keeping away from them."

"Anything specific?" Leo asked.

"You mean aside from Zankou, I suppose?"

"Unless Zankou is involved," Wyatt said.

"Involved in what?" the demon asked.

Leo looked to his sons. He wasn't sure exactly how much information he could share with this snitch. It wasn't like Benzimar was the trustworthy type. None of that seemed to matter, since the demon caught on to the hesitation.

"So then it's true," Benji said, leaning back in the chair.

"What's true?" Leo asked.

"The Charmed Ones are missing," Benji said. "That's what this is about, isn't it? I mean, you *are* their Whitelighter, aren't you? I mean, *former* Whitelighter."

Leo was both surprised and impressed. Benzimar was considerably up-to-date from his perch on his bar stool.

"Who has them?" Leo asked.

"Okay, okay. I can see you're not up for a chat," the demon said, eyeing the catnip. "Some lunatic who calls himself Dr. Gnivik. Though I don't think he got his MD, PhD, or whatever from any accredited university. The freak considers himself something of a scientist. Gives ol' Frankenstein a run for his money and all. Rumor has it he's been conducting some experiments on the Charmed Ones."

"Where can we find him?" Chris asked.

"Beats me," Benzimar said. "Might try the yellow pages, under 'Scientist-comma-Mad.' And you can beam that jar away to the ends of the Underworld, if you want. I can't tell you what I don't know."

Wyatt handed the jar to Benzimar, who immediately opened the lid and began inhaling the contents inside. The demon did not have the best table manners, and Leo had to turn away to keep from being ill over the disgusting scene.

"That's it?" Leo asked.

"That's all he knows," Chris said. "Once you get Benji started, he can't stop until he gets it all out. It's kind of a curse he's under. Makes him a very reliable snitch."

Benizmar looked up from his snack. A strand of catnip was stuck to his face. "How is that you know so much about me?" he asked again.

"You'll find out soon enough," Wyatt said. "Well, soon enough for a six-hundred-year-old demon."

Leo moved between he sons. "We should go. We need to find this Gnivik."

"Oh, one more thing," Benzimar said as his eyes started to glaze. "Some witch is after you."

Leo looked at the demon in confusion.

"You're Leo, right? The former Whitelighter?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, some witch named Xandra," the demon explained. "Says you owe her something."

"Okay," Leo said. "Thanks."

Wyatt turned to his father. "Who's—"

"We'll talk about that later," Leo said. Clearly this was a discussion that should not be had in front of the demon snitch. The boys seemed to agree as they each took Leo's arms.

"Now, y'all come back whenever you want," Benji said, getting a little loopy from the catnip. "I'm sure I have access to much more interesting information, so long as you have access to some more of this good luck."

"There's the Benji we know and distrust," Chris said with a laugh.

"See you in about twenty years," Wyatt said.

The brothers nodded to each other and orbed themselves and Leo back home, where they were met by a blast that destroyed the grandfather clock as soon as they appeared beside the staircase.

"Oops," Nisha said, flushing red. "I thought you were a demon."

"Guess it's attack first and ask questions later, huh?" Chris asked with a chuckle.

"Sorry," Nisha said as she surveyed the damage.

"No problem," Wyatt said. With a snap of his fingers, the clock fixed itself and chimed three bells.

"Speaking of demons," Chris said. "Who is this Xandra, and why is she looking for you, Dad?"

Leo didn't want to complicate things any more than he already had, but he knew that he couldn't keep secrets from his sons, especially since they had come all the way from the future to help. As they headed up to the attic, Leo quickly filled his sons in on Xandra and how she had given him the magic to call his sons back in time.

"The Black Magic Market?" Wyatt said. Leo could hear the disappointment in his son's voice. "Dad—"

"Your mother is in danger," Leo said. "I would do anything to protect her. Even make a deal with the Black Magic Market."

"What deal?" Chris asked. "What did it cost you?"

"Just a book from Magic School."

"Morder's Book of Magic," Nisha added.

Leo shot her a look. "Thank you, Nisha."

"But why is she after you now?" Wyatt asked.

"Well, I sort of altered the book before I gave

it to her," Leo admitted. "I tore out some of the more dangerous spells first."

Nisha smacked him. "Why didn't you tell me that? Here I thought you had betrayed Magic School and . . . well, you *did* betray Magic School, but not totally. And don't start with that whole plausible deniability thing again."

"But that's the reason," Leo said. "If Xandra came by, you could honestly tell her you didn't know anything about it."

Nisha looked concerned. "Wait a minute. What are the odds this witch is going to come by?"

"There's nothing about a demon named Gnivik in the Book of Shadows," Wyatt said, closing the book and changing the subject.

"Do you mean Dr. Gnivik?" Nisha asked. "The research scientist?"

"You know him?" Leo asked.

"We've met," she said. "Last year, in the rain forest . . . wait! He's a *demon*?"

"Apparently," Chris said.

Nisha sat down on one of the old attic chairs. "Wow. I just thought he was crazy."

"Nisha, what do you know about him?" Leo asked as he took the other chair.

"You mean, aside from the crazy?" Nisha said. "Well, he's kind of intense. Always has to be right, thinks he knows more about science than anyone else, scoffs at anyone who tries to question him. Actually *scoffs*. He scoffed at me several times."

"Do you know where we can find him?" Wyatt asked.

"He's got some lab," she said. "But I couldn't begin to guess where it is."

"There has to be a way to find this demon," Leo said. "Let's think about this logically."

"Logically?" Chris asked. "So far, we know that we're dealing with a demon mad scientist who likes to experiment with magic."

"Is there some kind of demon Discovery Store?" Wyatt wondered aloud. "I'm guessing he'd probably have an account."

"That's not a bad idea," Leo said.

Both his sons looked at him like he was crazy. "I was joking," Wyatt said.

"Yes," Leo replied. "I realize that. But you still may be onto something. Nisha said this guy likes to think he knows everything."

"And scoffing," she added. "He likes the scoffing, too."

"Well, okay," Leo said. "But what is the one thing magical alchemists have been trying to learn for centuries?"

Now both his sons' eyes lit up. "How to turn lead into gold," Chris said.

"Aha!" Nisha exclaimed. "But how does that help?"

Leo sprang up from the chair. He was too excited to sit. Once again, he had the makings of a plan. Now that he knew who had his wife, it was only a matter of finding him and getting

him to lead them back to Piper. "If we spread the word that one of the students at Magic School has stumbled across the formula to turn lead into gold, this demon scientist will naturally want to know more about it."

"And probably want to abduct the kid for questioning," Wyatt added.

"You can't let one of your students get kidnapped," Chris said. Leo looked at his son, not wanting to suggest what he was thinking. Luckily, Chris picked up on it all on his own.

"Really?" Chris said. "You think I could pass for a student at Magic School?"

"Hey, little bro, this is the curse of your boyish good looks," Wyatt said, mussing his brother's hair.

Leo looked to his youngest son pleadingly. This was the fastest way he could think of to bring the demon scientist out of hiding. For the moment, it was the only plan that he had.

"All right," Chris said. "How do we put this little sting into action?"

Chapter 10

Piper was the first to regain control over her body. It started slowly as she flexed her fingers, but the process moved more quickly as it spread down her limbs, until she was able to raise a foot. Not that it did her any good. She was still stuck in her cage. And now there was even less room since she was no longer alone. On the bright side, she knew where her sisters were. If only they weren't trapped in the same situation as she was.

"What did you give us?" Piper asked when she regained her voice.

"A little power suppressant," Dr. Gnivik said. "The same concept behind the magic running through those metal bars"—he held up the beaker of purple liquid—"but in a more convenient liquid form. If my tests are right, you'll be powerless for the next few hours . . . or days. Maybe weeks. Magic is not exactly an exact science. Actually, it's not a science at all." The

demon paused for a moment, and Piper was pretty sure that he had lost his train of thought altogether. "Anyway, the serum works differently on different people . . . depending on their differences. You see?"

"Not at all," Piper said. "So . . . you've used this stuff before?" Piper didn't really care about the serum's drug history. She was stalling for time. She didn't want the doctor trying anything until Phoebe and Paige had regained their mobility as well. Whether or not their powers were truly suppressed, being frozen made them considerably more vulnerable.

"Oh, I've tested this little wonder drug on a variety of demons," he explained. "And witches as well. Never anyone as powerful as the Charmed Ones, though. I'm thinking if this works out, it might be time to mass-produce."

"So, we really *are* just glorified lab rats?" Piper asked.

"Oh, no, no, no," he said. "Not at all. Well, maybe a little bit. But not for something as vulgar as a witch suppressant . . . oh, Witch Suppressant! I like that. Or maybe repellant? Witch Repellant? Well, it doesn't actually repel a witch. Maybe I should put my name in there, too. Dr. Gnivik's Wonderful Witch Repellent! Or does the *wonderful* part sound too much like a snake-oil salesman?"

Piper didn't know whether to laugh or reach out and try to snap his neck. Both options seemed

fitting at the moment. Instead, she stood in stony silence, much like her sisters were still forced to do. She could see in their eyes that they thought this lunatic was as crazy as Piper did.

"Where was I?" the demon asked.

"About to reveal your diabolical plan, I believe," Piper replied. She could see that Phoebe had started to blink again. It wouldn't be long before both her fingers would be able to wiggle and then both Piper's sisters would be fully mobile again. Not that they could do anything in their cage, but it was a start.

Gnivik tore his glasses from his face. "Right! Yes! My diabolical plan. And it is diabolical, if I do say so myself." The doctor looked to Piper for a reaction. She gave none. "Um . . . yes," he continued as he attempted to pull down a film projection screen on the wall. That took up some time as well. The screen refused to stay down for the demon scientist. Every time he pulled it to its full length, the screen whipped back up into a roll. At least Gnivik was doing all the stalling on his own.

Once he got the screen to stay down, Gnivik went over to his control console and dimmed the lights. He turned another switch, and the screen filled with the beginnings of an old filmstrip, like the kind Piper had been shown in school when she was a child. The frames counted down backward to the start of the film.

"What is it that makes the Charmed Ones

tick?" Dr. Gnivik asked as if he were giving a presentation to a classroom instead of just Piper and her sisters. "Why—after all these centuries—have the stars aligned to make these women the most powerful witches of all time?" The screen was filled with images from their earlier battle in the Manor. The odd thing was that the entire film looked like an old school filmstrip, with fuzzy focus, scratches in the "film," and a disjointed sound track. It was especially weird since the demon that had been filming their fight had been using modern equipment. Piper just chalked it up to another one of the demon's eccentricities.

Dr. Gnivik was lost in his own presentation for a moment, and Piper couldn't help but watch a bit as well. She couldn't be bothered to listen to what he was droning on about, but the video presentation was interesting. Piper didn't often get to see herself in action. She felt a little like a football player watching game film, second-guessing her actions, silently criticizing some of her own behavior, and finding alternate things she should have tried. *This would make a good training film for the students in Magic School*, she thought.

Piper gave herself a mental smack in the head. She was beginning to think like the lunatic scientist. She had been in that cage for far too long.

As interesting as the film was, her sisters

were nearly fully mobile now, and Piper wanted to move things along. She cleared her throat, hoping to get the doctor's attention while he continued to extol the virtues of his demon minions even though they had been fighting a losing battle. Actually, he was really bragging more about his attack plan, which Piper wanted to point out had been a total failure. Piper coughed again, which pulled the good doctor out of his presentation. He turned back to her and her sisters, looking as if he had totally forgotten they were in the room.

"Is this going somewhere?" Piper asked.

"Ah, yes," he said, tugging on the screen so it snapped back into place. "My diabolical plan. Sorry. I thought you'd be interested in the process by which I developed the plan."

"Yeah," Piper said. "Not so much."

"Okay, then," he said with disappointment as he switched off the projector and moved over to the cage to address them more personally. "It's quite simple, really. As you see, I already tested you when you had your powers." There was a ringing inside his lab coat, which the demon scientist ignored. "Now I'd like to see what you can do when you're totally powerless. I've devised some new tests to learn a bit more about what makes the Charmed Ones tick." The phone rang again. "Of course, most of these tests could result in death, so it's a good thing I have three of . . . oh, for heaven's sake." On the third ring, Dr. Gnivik

whipped out his cell phone and answered it, stepping away from the cage. The sisters tried to listen to what he was saying, but his end of the conversation consisted of little more than grunts of annoyance and a few petulant huffs.

Piper looked to her sisters for some suggestions on how to get out of their current predicament, but before they could say anything, Gnivik's call came to an abrupt end. "Probably just a waste of time, but I'll be there." He hung up his cell phone and turned back to the sisters.

"You get reception down here?" Paige asked, stalling. "In the Underworld?"

"I *am* a scientist, you know," he said. "Setting up a cell tower relay station was child's play. I could do it for you, you know. That is, if my tests don't kill you. I guess you may not have to worry about cell phone reception. But I'd be happy to help you, if you survive."

"Good to know," Paige said with a shrug.

"Now, where was I?" the doctor asked.

"In the middle of telling us your diabolical plan," Phoebe said.

"Oh, yes," he said distractedly. "Thank you. Um ... I'll also be monitoring your physiological makeup to learn just what it is you three tap into, to access your powers. Naturally, that's a lot easier to monitor when your powers are suppressed."

"Naturally," the Charmed Ones said in unison.

Dr. Gnivik paused, not sure if they were

to say, someone is making claims of an onerous nature and I must go to expose a fraud."

"Okay, sure," Phoebe said. "We'll just wait here till you get back."

"Nonsense," Gnivik said. "I wouldn't want you three to sit here with nothing to do. I have the perfect way for you to occupy your time." He walked over to his control pad and pushed a button. Instantly, the cage floor dropped out from under the Charmed Ones. Oddly enough, they didn't fall along with the floor. They just hung there; suspended in air.

"That can't be right," Piper said, looking down at the darkness below her feet.

"Oops, my mistake," the demon said, blushing. "Darn that gravity. Always playing games." He pressed another button, and the sisters dropped down below.

They seemed to be falling forever. It was impossible to think that they were going to survive the landing, considering that the ground still seemed to be a long way off. Piper worried that the demon scientist had forgotten more about gravity than he had anticipated. Considering their rate of speed and the depth of their descent, death seemed to be the only option.

Piper was the first to suspect that something about their free fall was amiss. It didn't quite feel all that free of a fall. Sure, the wind was blowing her hair above her and the cave walls were flying past at a high rate of speed, but

mocking him or not. He seemed to convince himself that they weren't, and then continued explaining his plan. "Once I know that, I will have a better understanding of how your magic works. From there I believe I will be able to extrapolate how all magic is developed in witches and maybe, just maybe learn how to control the powers of every witch in the world *and* the Underworld!" He ended his speech looking at the sisters like he was waiting for praise or, at the very least, some applause.

"You forgot the maniacal laughter," Paige said dryly. "A proper megalomaniacal speech should always end with maniacal laughter."

He used his glasses to salute her in appreciation. "I shall keep that in mind for future speeches."

"Do you really think we're going to agree to play along with your little experiment?" Phoebe asked.

"My dear Charmed One . . . you have no choice." Dr. Gnivik said, taking out what looked to be a PDA and making some notes. "But first, I have a pressing engagement that I need to attend. That call was about . . . well, it was probably about a waste of time, but we scientists must always be open to learning more about new discoveries."

"We have no idea what you're talking about," Piper said.

"Sadly, you probably still wouldn't understand if I explained it to you," he said. "Suffice it

something felt off. She closed her eyes and allowed her other senses to experience the drop. The realization struck her immediately. It had been an optical illusion. They weren't falling nearly as quickly or as far as she had thought. Somehow, the demon doctor had manipulated gravity and they were really drifting at a much slower rate of speed than the cave walls rushing past them indicated.

Piper opened her eyes and shared her suspicions with Phoebe and Paige. Even with that knowledge, the speeding cave walls still worried her. It was possible that the illusion wasn't an illusion and Dr. Gnivik *had* sent them to their deaths. But her fears were soon put at ease when the trio of witches came to a gentle landing on the top of a huge staircase.

"Well, that was pointless," Paige said, wiping a bead of sweat from her forehead.

"Oh look, a maze," Phoebe said, pointing down the staircase.

Piper looked down to see a demon-made series of paths winding about in a square maze. The entire construct looked fairly basic and uninteresting. It would have been much more interesting had it been a classical-looking labyrinth with topiary or stone walls and maybe a Minotaur patrolling the paths. But no, it was simply wooden walls and clear paths. "Okay, he's really starting to carry this whole lab rat thing way too far," she said.

"Starting to?" Paige asked.

"So, what do we do?" Phoebe asked.

"We refuse to play his game," Piper replied. "We just stay up here and—"

Piper was cut off when the floor dropped out from beneath her for the second time in five minutes. This time, it wasn't a straight drop. All the steps had collapsed into a slide, and the three sisters slid their way down to the entrance of the maze. They tumbled to a stop, falling on top of one another.

Paige was the first to find her voice. She turned to Piper. "You were saying?"

"Okay, we'll run his little maze and reach the cheese at the end," Piper said. "Then we're going to kick some demon butt."

Chapter 11

Leo peeked out at the lecture hall from backstage. It was quite a packed house, considering they had only managed to get word out about the "miraculous discovery" an hour ago. Of course, over half the seats were filled by holographic people projected there by Wyatt in a full-scale glamour the likes of which the Charmed Ones couldn't have managed themselves. It was just another reminder of the amount of power Leo's eldest child possessed.

"This is crazy," Chris said as he paced backstage while looking at his note cards. "We are never going to be able to pull this off."

"If we're lucky, you won't even need to make the presentation," Leo said. "Once we have Gnivik, we can force him to tell us where your mother is."

When Leo had hatched his plan, he hadn't realized that, while Chris was more than capable at taking on the most vicious demons, he

suffered from near debilitating stage fright. Leo hoped that it wouldn't interfere with their plan. He would have suggested that Wyatt do the presentation, but he didn't know there was a problem until after Wyatt had begun his glamour. Leo suspected that if half the audience suddenly disappeared, someone might raise a question or two. They were stuck with Chris as their spokesman. But Leo had every confidence in his son's ability to pull it off. Chris clearly knew what was at stake and wouldn't fail them.

"But what if the demon won't talk?" Chris said.

"I think it would be better to wait until after the presentation and then follow him back to his lair," Wyatt added, keeping one eye on his fake crowd.

"You're not helping," Chris said to his brother.

"Well, it would," Wyatt insisted. "Aside from my fake people, we don't know who's in this audience." He turned to his father. "How did you manage that, by the way? Magic School's at an undisclosed location. It isn't exactly open to the public. Especially not demons."

"The lecture hall is," Leo explained. "The hall exists on a different plane, attached to the school but separate so the students remain safe, but we can bring in all sorts of guest lecturers and have open forums for the magical community. The downside is that it means demons can sneak in, although in this case we can take advantage of that loophole."

"This is not going to work," Chris fretted.

"Just memorize your cards so you sound like you're familiar with the material," Leo said, trying to calm his son. "You'll be fine."

"I don't know what half of this means," Chris said, throwing up his hands in frustration.

"Just stick to the script," Leo said. He understood what Chris was worried about. Leo had glanced at the cards before handing them to Chris. He hadn't been able to make heads or tails out of most of it. "Professor Sonoris worked hard compiling that information for you in a very short amount of time. It should be able to fool most of the audience into believing you know what you're talking about for the better part of your lecture."

"And what about the ones who catch on to the fact that I'm a fraud?" Chris asked.

"Hopefully, we won't have to get that far," Leo said. "Once we get our hands on Gnivik, I'll pull the fire alarm or something."

"Or something?" Chris said. "Is anyone else getting a certain Three Stooges vibe out of this plan?"

Leo tried to ignore his son's pessimism, chalking the attitude up to nerves. Not that he thought his plan was one of the more grand designs he had ever come up with, but it wasn't as bad as Chris was making it out to be. "Wyatt, has anyone matching Gnivik's description come in yet?"

"Not that I've noticed," Wyatt said. Nisha had given them a detailed explanation of what they should look for. If Nisha had been only partially correct in the details she had provided, then the doctor was going to easily stand out in the crowd. Although there were a fair amount of professorial types in attendance, apparently Dr. Gnivik took the whole concept to the extreme. "But I figure he's going to be . . . oh, I think I've got him."

Leo peeked out from backstage and looked in the direction of Wyatt's gaze. He was pretty sure that his son had found their mark. Rarely did anyone match a stereotypical description as much as the so-called mad scientist pushing his way into the front row of the lecture hall. Wyatt had to make quick work of moving a few fake people in order to accommodate the demon before Gnivik realized he could walk right through them.

The man they assumed to be Dr. Gnivik was wearing a lab coat and thick glasses, just as Nisha had described. His messy gray hair was sticking almost straight up, like the well-known image of Albert Einstein. Even at a distance, the man seemed scattered, talking animatedly to both his companions, turning from one to the next without even waiting for an acknowledgment from either.

It was those two companions who concerned Leo the most. Dr. Gnivik was flanked by a pair

of rather burly looking demons. Either demon on his own would have been cause for concern, but the two of them together were a serious threat to Leo's plan. It wasn't like he could just walk up to Dr. Gnivik and pull the demon away from his bodyguards. Either he was going to need to find a way to finesse the situation, or they were going to have to alter their plan.

"We've got a problem," Leo said.

Chris looked up from his cards and pushed his way to the curtain for a peek. "Problem? What problem?"

"It's going to be pretty hard to strong-arm the geek with those two goons flanking him," Wyatt said, confirming that he shared Leo's suspicions.

"Okay, new plan," Leo said. "Chris, you need to make the presentation and we'll follow Gnivik out in the end."

"That sounds suspiciously like my plan," Wyatt noted.

"But the presentation is fake," Chris reminded his father. "Somebody out there is going to be onto me."

"You could always get sick in the middle and have to leave the stage," Wyatt suggested. "Seeing how green your face looks right now, I'm guessing that won't be too hard to do."

Leo tried to reassure his son, "Look, Chris—"

"No, I like that plan," Chris said, looking relieved for the first time since he had been

assigned this mission. "I'm pretty sure I can puke on command."

"Lovely," Leo said. "Just what every father wants to hear. Is this a talent you picked up in college?"

"Actually," Wyatt said, "it's—"

"Let's get this thing over with," Chris said quickly.

Leo looked over his son to make sure Chris was ready. The young man still looked nervous about the public speaking, but he also seemed to be in "now or never" mode. Leo took that as a good sign and stepped out to the podium.

The sea of magic users before Leo made him a little nervous as well. There was no telling what would happen when they found out they had been brought there on false pretenses. The magical community as a whole tended to be a whiny bunch on the best of days. Hopefully, Chris would be able to salvage what he could of the presentation and Leo could extricate his sons from the place without incident.

Leo opened the presentation with a brief bit about the students at Magic School, to give the thing a genuine feel. He wanted to keep his comments short, but Leo knew, as headmaster, he would be expected to milk the credit for his students' achievements. He went on for a couple of minutes about a Magic School education, before moving things along and introducing Chris as a "promising student in the field of alchemy."

Chris walked out to a smattering of applause. If anyone could manage to applaud with skepticism, it was this group.

"Good afternoon," Chris said, shakily, into the mic.

Leo made his way backstage, where he could keep an eye on Dr. Gnivik without the bodyguards noticing that he was staring. It was all he could do to control his anger. The demon that he believed had kidnapped his wife and her sisters was sitting about twenty-five feet away. Leo was glad that the demon fancied himself a scientist. It probably meant that Piper was still alive and just being studied by Gnivik. The demon would want to run tests on the Charmed Ones for whatever he was studying. He would have to keep them alive for that. *Right?*

Leo tried to keep images of postmortem exams from his mind. Piper was still alive. He would have been able to sense it if she wasn't. But that didn't mean she hadn't been undergoing horribly painful experiments. For the first time since his fall from grace, Leo was actually glad that he didn't have his powers anymore. There was no telling what he would have done to the demon to make him talk.

Chris seemed to be doing well with his speech. He hadn't stumbled too much over the words and he looked like he was getting more at ease with the audience. He was only a couple of cue cards in, but it appeared that he had the

audience's attention. Just as Chris flipped the third card, Leo noticed that Chris was looking ill again. At first he was worried for his son, but then he realized it was an act. Chris was about to call the presentation to a premature end.

At the moment when Chris paused in his speech, the man they believed to be Dr. Gnivik shot up from his seat. "I have a question!"

Chris looked flustered for a moment, and Leo wasn't sure if it was genuine or part of the act. Either way, Chris recovered and addressed the man rather than abruptly running from the stage, which is what Leo assumed he had been about to do. "Yes, mister . . ."

"It's *doctor*," the man replied in a huff. "Dr. Gnivik."

"What's your question, Dr. Nivik?"

"It's Gnivik!" the man huffed again. "The G is *not* silent."

Chris nodded with a smile on his face. Several other audience members seemed to find the man funny as well, including the imaginary ones Wyatt had created. Mumbles were heard throughout the audience. Leo knew his son was egging the man on. Hopefully the demon would leave in a huff and they could put an end to this charade.

"Your question?" Chris asked.

"Yes. It sounds to me like you're using a cross between Ptolemy's theorem and Shinberg's hypothesis."

Chris looked perplexed, but recovered quickly. "Well, if that's what it sounds like, I guess I can't argue that."

"But how do you then account for Azabar's studies in magiphysical analysis that disproved not just one, but *both* of those concepts as pure drivel."

"Well . . ."

"And furthermore," the doctor continued, "I find it hard to believe that you could start any equation without first looking at the Aurum Geolo Property." He turned to face the audience. "Why, I myself have come closer to manipulating the molecules of turning lead to gold than it seems this *boy* is going to be able to do with his grade-school equations."

"If you'd just give me a moment," Chris said, shuffling through his notes. Leo knew his son was doing this for effect. They hadn't expected anyone to catch on so soon that Chris was totally faking it. It was most convenient that it was the one person they had hoped to send out of the lecture hall first.

"But I *have* given you a moment," Gnivik said. "I have given you far too many moments already. I was in the midst of a rather delicate, rather *important* experiment when I heard about this so-called breakthrough discovery." The man's face went red as he continued to get himself all worked up. "I had to leave at a critical juncture to attend this farce. I do not know what

they are teaching you at this alleged *Magic* School, but you, my young friend, are nothing but a fraud."

With that, the doctor turned sharply and made for the door, with his lab coat blowing in the wind behind him. His two guards quickly followed him out of the auditorium. Leo barely had time to follow. His mind was still stuck on the "rather important experiment" that the demon had referred to. It was entirely likely that the experiment had to do with the Charmed Ones.

"Wyatt," Leo called out behind him as he followed the demon.

"I'm on it," Wyatt said, without requiring any more of an explanation.

As Leo made his way up the aisle, he saw that most of the audience was choosing to ignore the mad scientist's outburst. If that happened, Chris would have to finish his fake lecture, which Leo was pretty sure neither of them wanted. Thankfully, Wyatt helped out by sending his fake audience members out of the auditorium behind the doctor. The few real people who actually remained were made to feel like they were foolish for sticking around. By the time Leo was outside of the lecture hall, most of the audience were out of their seats behind him. A moment later, Wyatt and Chris orbed to his side.

"Where are they?" Wyatt asked.

"Over there." Leo pointed to a portal that

would take them out of the realm in which the lecture hall existed. "If we hurry, we can ride their trail back to the demon's lab."

Without another word, Leo and his sons followed the demon through the portal. They were closer to Piper than he had been in the past twenty-four hours. Leo was sure that they were on the right track. It was only a matter of time before he was reunited with his wife.

Chapter 12

"Seriously," Paige said as they made their way through the endless maze, "how bad are we at this? We should have been done by now. The maze isn't that big. At least it didn't look that big from the top of that crazy staircase."

"And what exactly is this freak trying to test us on?" Phoebe added. "Patience? Because I'm starting to run out."

"You're not the only one," Piper said as she continued to will herself to put one foot in front of the other. "As if this whole thing wasn't ridiculous enough already. We've been walking around for an hour with nothing to show for it."

It felt good to get their anger out, but the attitude didn't cover up their fears. Piper knew that her sisters were just as concerned as she was about their situation. Sure, their abductor was little more than a joke, but he was a dangerous joke. Dr. Gnivik had an army of demons at his command. Considering what Phoebe and Paige

had told her about their time in captivity, he had an impressive compound as well. She suspected that there were more than just three rooms where the demon kept his prisoners. He probably had a lab for every occasion. But all of that paled in comparison to what he had been able to achieve.

Piper and her sisters had had problems with their powers before. Magic went on the fritz for a variety of reasons—usually at the most inopportune times. But the thought of a serum that could actually suppress magic—something that could be administered at will, or against one's will—had the sisters more than a little scared.

"Then again, it's not a bad idea," Piper mumbled to herself.

"What's not a bad idea?" Paige asked.

Piper was surprised that her sister had heard her. "This serum thing," Piper said. "That got rid of our powers."

"So you *like* being defenseless?" Paige asked.

Piper stopped walking, and leaned against a wall. She gestured to the maze around them. "No, but I don't like this either. And if getting rid of our powers means that insane demons don't attack us anymore . . . maybe that's not such a bad thing."

"What makes you think they'd stop attacking us just because we've lost our powers?" Paige asked, stopping along with Phoebe. "We'd still have the Book of Shadows. And the Spiritual Nexus underneath our house."

For Piper, the answers were obvious. They could donate the Book of Shadows to Magic School. And they could always move. She knew logically that they could do neither of those things, but the thought was tempting.

"It would be easier to live a mortal life with Leo, though," Phoebe said, getting to the heart of Piper's idea.

"Yes," Piper said. "It would. But you're right. The demons wouldn't stop coming after us just because we were powerless. If anything, they'd probably step up their attacks because our defenses would be down."

"Which makes this serum the *doctor* came up with more dangerous," Phoebe reminded Piper. "Imagine what would happen if he found a way to make it last permanently. He could turn it into a weapon. That wouldn't be good."

"Actually, maybe it would," Paige said. "If *we* were the ones in control of the weapon."

"I don't know," Piper said. "It seems too dangerous to have around. We should stop talking about this, though. Don't want to give Gnivik any ideas if he's listening."

"What listening?" Phoebe asked . . . loudly. "He's left us alone for the past hour to do nothing but waste our time." She was yelling out loud, clearly hoping to get some kind of reaction from the demon. "Some scientist. Can't even run a proper experiment."

In the history of egging people on, Piper had

heard more convincing insults, but this one seemed to do the trick.

"Ah, yes, hello ladies," Dr. Gnivik's voice boomed around them like the Wizard's voice in Oz. None of them had expected him to answer. The sisters looked around for speakers, but the voice seemed to be coming out of the air itself. "Sorry about the delay. That business I was telling you about earlier turned out to be a total waste of time. Still, these things can't be ignored. When people start making certain claims, they must be investigated, if only to reveal them as fraudulent."

The sisters didn't have a clue what he was talking about.

"That's okay," Phoebe said. "We didn't have anything better to do while you were off running errands."

"Though, really, you couldn't have kidnapped us when you had more time?" Piper shouted.

"Shows poor planning, if you ask me," Piper added. If they weren't getting out of there anytime soon, it certainly didn't hurt to antagonize their abductor. At the very least, it made them feel better about their situation.

"Yes, well, these things can't be helped," Dr. Gnivik replied. They could hear the anger in his voice. "I *am* a very important scientist, you know."

"If you're so important, how come we never heard about you before today?" Phoebe asked.

"You don't even have a write-up in our Book of Shadows."

There was a long silence hanging in the air . . . literally. "Well, I assure you, someone will be writing about our little encounter," he finally said, with a menace in his voice that had not been there earlier. "It just won't be the three of you." Again, there was silence.

"Well, that's not good," Paige said. She looked at Phoebe. "You had to go antagonize him."

"Hey, don't blame me," Phoebe said.

"Quiet," Piper said. "Do you hear that?"

Dr. Gnivik's voice spoke out again. "The testing shall now commence."

"Now!" Paige yelled out. "What have we been doing for the past hour?"

"Quiet!" Piper insisted.

The sisters listened to the silence. In the distance, they heard a whooshing sound. It seemed to be approaching them. The noise was getting louder, as if it was traveling at a high rate of speed.

"Get down," Piper yelled as she dragged Phoebe and Paige to the floor. She wasn't sure what they were ducking from, but it seemed the best course of action.

As soon as they hit the floor, a trio of spinning blades came around the corner in front of them. Piper felt the wind as the blades, flying horizontally, buzzed past them only two feet above their bodies. Had they still been standing, the

Charmed Ones would have been cleaved in half.

"What was that supposed to test?" Paige asked as she sat up. "Our reflexes?"

"Maybe he just wanted to get our attention," Piper suggested.

"Well, he's got mine." Phoebe carefully stood and placed her right hand on the wall beside her. "What say we get out of here before he tries something else? Isn't there this thing about mazes where if you put one hand on the nearest wall, you can follow that wall until you find an exit?"

"Where exactly did you hear that?" Paige asked.

"Do I know where I pick things up?" Phoebe replied. "I don't know. It makes sense, though."

"As much as anything in the crazy place makes—" Piper cut herself off. Something smelled odd, and vaguely like moldy cheese. "You've got to be kidding."

Paige sniffed the air as well. "Again . . . someone is taking this lab rat thing a little too far, don't you think?"

Piper would have laughed if there had been anything funny about the situation. But, in this experiment, she and her sisters were the rats. Instead of commenting, she just started walking again, following Phoebe, whose hand was sliding along the wall as they made their way. They kept their guard on high alert as they continued through the maze. Dr. Gnivik could try anything

to "test" them. If the spinning blades were any indication, they could be in a lot of trouble before they reached the cheese.

What has my life turned into? Piper wondered.

They reached a crossroads in the maze. Piper tried to get all literary and look at it as a metaphor for her life, but the reality was they were in a maze and had already crossed several dozen such roads. Phoebe, with her hand on the wall, continued to follow the maze to the right.

"Hold it," Piper said, sniffing the air. "The aroma of cheese is coming from that direction." She pointed to the left.

"Yes, but do we really trust anything in this maze?" Phoebe asked. "I still think it makes more sense to follow the wall until we find a way out."

"Unless we can't even trust the walls," Paige added.

"What do you mean?" Piper asked.

"We all saw the whole maze before we dropped into it," Paige said. "It wasn't that big. The only way we could be stuck here for so long is if the maze was changing while we walked. Gnivik probably just set the thing on autopilot and went off to run the errand, knowing we couldn't get out while he was gone."

"A very astute conclusion," Gnivik's voice filled the air. "Good use of logic."

"Whatever happened to the idea of a passive observer?" Piper wondered aloud.

There was no response.

"Well, you showed him," Paige said.

Paige started down the corridor to the left. "Let's just follow the cheese."

"Now there's a sentence you don't hear every day," Paige said.

The scent was getting stronger. Piper knew they were on the right track. That is, if the scent was genuine and not just another stalling technique. Several quick twists through the maze cleared that up for her. After they turned right, around a corner, they nearly stumbled into a huge hunk of cheese resting atop a pedestal.

"That's it?" Piper asked. "That's the experiment?"

"No," Gnivik replied. "That was the prelude to the experiment. I needed some time to set a few things up."

"This is getting more and more insane," Phoebe said.

"Be that as it may . . . ," Gnivik said.

The Charmed Ones saw the walls fading around them. At first, Piper thought the maze was disappearing, but she quickly realized that she was the one doing the vanishing act. Before she knew it, she was teleported back to another room in the lab. Gone were the maze walls and scent of cheese, to be replaced by the same white cinder-block walls she had been surrounded by before. But there was no cage in this room. The test tubes and beakers were kept to a minimum.

This must have been the testing room, because experimental apparatus of various designs were scattered about.

Paige had been beamed onto a treadmill. The machine was off, but Piper didn't think it would stay that way for long. Paige reached out her hand and found herself touching an invisible force field before she could even extend her arm to full length. The field surrounded her on all sides. She looked not unlike a mime trapped in an invisible box.

"Not again," Paige said.

The treadmill slowly began to turn. Paige was about to slam back into the invisible wall and had to start moving, if only to keep from falling on her face. As she walked, the treadmill moved faster, forcing her to run. Paige reached out for the bar in front of her for something to hold on to as the speed steadily increased.

Meanwhile, Phoebe was strapped to an exam table. From her position on her back, Phoebe could not see what Piper was looking at. A table full of sharp and threatening-looking instruments loomed over Piper's sister. Piper didn't want to know what Dr. Gnivik intended to do with the instruments, though her imagination was working overtime providing horrible images of her sister splayed open before her.

As for Piper, she was strapped into a metal chair. Electrodes had been placed at various points in her body. She had hoped that they

were merely there to record her vital signs and test her responses. The only problem was, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was strapped to an electric chair and that at any moment thousands of volts of electricity could be sent coursing through her body.

Well, this isn't good.

Chapter 13

Leo, Chris, and Wyatt stood outside the metal double doors of the demon's lair, searching for a way in. They had managed to track the demon back through the portal he had taken out of the lecture hall, but that had been the easy part. The problem was, the demon preferred an indirect route to return to his lair. It had been clear that Dr. Gnivik was the paranoid type as he bounced about the Underworld taking different portals while Leo and the boys orbed about after him. When they finally ended up in a cave tunnel in front of a set of large metal doors, Leo knew they had reached their destination.

The first thing they did when they got there was to take out the surveillance cameras. Wyatt created a simple glamour that projected an image of the empty cave in front of the two cameras trained on the entrance. They didn't need anyone inside watching them while they tried to figure out a way to break in.

The plan had been to attack as soon as the doors opened so they could slip inside with the demon and his goons. The problem was that they were outnumbered the moment the doors opened. A welcoming committee of another pair of demons awaited the doctor upon his return. It was unclear if anyone else was waiting just inside, but Leo had decided not to risk it. They would have to quietly slip inside later, which he would soon learn was not as easy as he had anticipated.

The boys had already tried orbing, but there was some kind of magical seal that kept them out. Both sides of the doors were attached to solid cave walls that were likely very thick and substantial. There were no alternate tunnels in this section of Underworld cave. There appeared to be no way in or out except for those doors.

"How about this," Wyatt said as he thrust his arms forward and blue bolts of light shot from his fingers. The lightning struck the doors dead center, but didn't so much as make a dent.

"Why not add some more power," Chris said, mimicking his brother's actions. Twenty bolts of light shot out from the boys' fingers, concentrating on the seam between the two doors. Leo watched in awe, wondering just how much magic his grown sons controlled.

The doors began to smoke at the point where their energy was focused. The beams were too bright for Leo to be able to see if they were making

any progress, but he took the smoke as a good sign. He was so focused on getting inside, he didn't notice that his sons looked like they were running out of energy until Chris stumbled.

Wyatt didn't look much better.

"Boys, stop," Leo cautioned. "It's not worth it."

Chris looked to be considering his father's suggestion, but Wyatt was more determined. "Just a bit more," Wyatt said as he redoubled his effort.

More smoke poured from the doors, but the metal didn't seem to be buckling nearly as much as Wyatt and Chris appeared to be. Leo looked up and saw that the minor glamours Wyatt had placed in front of the cameras were beginning to flicker. If they failed, whoever was watching the monitors inside would see them. And the way his sons looked at the moment, they were in no shape to receive visitors.

"I said, stop!" Leo commanded his sons.

This time, they both listened, cutting the power to their energy beams and falling to the ground. Leo rushed to their sides.

"Sorry, Dad," Wyatt said weakly.

"No," Leo said. "Don't apologize. You need to save your energy. Can't use it all up before we get inside. That was quite impressive."

"Yeah," Chris said. "He knows it. That's why he makes with the light show. Takes a lot of energy and doesn't always end up with results."

"There was that witch from Paris," Wyatt said. "She was impressed by it."

"Sorry," Chris corrected. "Forgot that. Wyatt is good at using his magic to pick up girls. Talk about personal gain."

Leo couldn't help but laugh at his sons. It was weird to think that these were the men his little babies were going to grow into. It was nice that they were able to keep their sense of humor. There wasn't much their family had to laugh about in life. Leo had already seen firsthand versions of his future sons that were steeped in bitterness and hatred. The smiles made him feel much better. Like he could achieve anything.

Leo let his sons rest for a minute while he examined the doors. All that energy had been expended for nothing. The doors had a couple of small burn marks on them, but not even a dent in the metal. It was clear that magic was not going to get them through in that way.

When he turned back, Leo was surprised to see both his sons standing and looking none the worse for wear. "We're good," Wyatt said.

But Leo didn't want them to push themselves too hard. "Are you sure? We can take some time to rest."

"No," Chris said. "Mom's had to wait too long already. Any new ideas on how to get inside?"

"We could always knock," Leo suggested.

"And pretend we're electricians, coming to fix a problem?" Chris said. "That never works for us."

"I mean force our way inside," Leo said.

"Oh, fisticuffs," Chris joked. "Always useful with ol' glass jaw over there."

"One demon," Wyatt said. "One demon knocks you out, and you hear about it for the rest of your life."

Much as Leo was interested in knowing how his sons battled demons in the future, their good-natured ribbing wasn't exactly helping them get into the demon's compound.

"There has to be some kind of ventilation in this place," Leo suggested.

"I don't know," Chris said. "The mad scientist may have figured out a way to get air out of stone." He walked up to the metal doors and knocked.

Leo was caught off guard. "Chris, what are you doing?"

"I liked your plan best," he said simply.

Wyatt shook his head. "He does that. The whole leap without looking thing."

"And it often works," Chris noted.

"Yeah, but I usually wind up unconscious, first."

Inside the compound, Piper sat strapped to a chair as she watched her sisters in their respective prisons. Phoebe was bound to a table, unaware of the danger she was in, while Paige was running full out on the treadmill from Hell.

Phoebe twisted her head in Piper's direction. But the way the table was positioned, Piper

couldn't quite lock eyes with her sister to reassure her. "I'm here," Piper said.

"How do we get out of this one?" Phoebe asked. "I feel a bit like Robin in an old episode of *Batman*."

"That seems about right," Piper said as the door to the lab opened and Dr. Gnivik slipped inside. "And here comes the Joker now."

"What?" Gnivik said as he entered the room. "Did I miss something? Some of your witty banter? I have noticed how some people, such as yourselves, rely on humor to lighten the mood in tense situations. I'm thinking of conducting an experiment someday. If any of you are still alive after we run these experiments, maybe you'd like to participate."

The sisters glared at their captor.

"See, I was making a joke," Gnivik explained. "More witty banter to lighten the mood!" He shook his head sadly at the girls, like they were the ones who didn't understand him instead of the other way around.

Paige banged a fist against the invisible force field that kept her trapped on the treadmill. "You . . . are . . . in . . . sane," she said between breaths. The treadmill was spinning so fast, Piper doubted that her sister could last much longer. She was afraid to think what would happen once Paige dropped from exhaustion.

"Paige, save your breath," she warned. "He's not worth it."

"Oh, I'm not, am I?" he asked as he passed over Phoebe's head and moved toward Piper.

"Where'd he go?" Phoebe asked. "What's he doing?"

"He's over by me," Piper said. "Don't worry. He's not doing anything yet."

"Oh, but I am," Dr. Gnivik said. "The tests have already begun."

"Yes, I can see that," Piper said. "Paige is getting a very good workout. She'll be able to skip the gym this week."

"Oh, poor Piper," he said, shaking his head. "Still with the forced quips to hide your fear. It's okay, dear, it will all be over soon enough."

"And what do you have in mind for me?" Piper asked. "Exercise bike? StairMaster?"

"This is the problem with the uneducated," Gnivik said. "They fail to recognize brilliance when they witness it."

Piper wanted to make a comment, but she figured it was just going to encourage more condescending talk from the lunatic. She sat in silence, trying to ignore the electrodes that were stuck to her skin and starting to itch.

While Dr. Gnivik read the scanners that Piper was attached to, she tried to tap into her powers and blow him up. Nothing happened, but it was worth a try.

"Very good," Gnivik said from behind her. "Very good indeed."

She didn't want to encourage him, but her

curiosity was getting to her. Besides, the more she kept him talking, the better chance she had to find a way out. From her position, she could see that Phoebe was already working on a plan. Phoebe's hand was moving along the edge of the metal table. She was working on one of the straps binding her, trying to rub it weak so she could break free. So long as Gnivik was scoffing at Piper, there was less of a chance he would notice.

"So, what's the point of all this, anyway?" Piper asked, trying to keep the doctor's attention on her. "What's Paige's little jog going to prove?"

"Please don't bother humoring me," Dr. Gnivik said, sounding a little hurt. "I know you don't care what I'm up to, trying to make the world a better place. You just want to mock me."

Can you blame me? she thought about his pathetic display.

"No," she said, lying. "I really want to know. I've decided that if I'm going to play a part in this experiment, I'd like to at least know what's going on."

"Okay!" the demon said excitedly as he pulled up a stool and sat beside Piper. "As you can see, you've got the best view of the room from here." She had to agree. Paige was facing a wall, and Phoebe could only see the ceiling. "That's because you're my constant. The observer. You get to watch what I'm doing to your sisters so I can record your reactions."

"That's . . ." She trailed off. She wanted to say it was sick, but antagonizing him was not the point at the moment. She had to give Phoebe time to work at her bonds.

She hadn't needed to say anything, though. Gnivik filled in his own praise. "I know. Genius. It will give me an idea of what changes your body will experience when you know that you're helpless to do anything." His voice was approaching something close to glee.

"Of course, Paige over there is the physical test," Gnivik said.

"Endurance?" Piper guessed. Her sister looked like she was running on fumes already. And the treadmill kept ticking up a notch in speed with every passing minute.

"Oh, but it's so much more than that," he said excitedly. "It's fight or flight. As Paige grows more and more tired, she's going to keep trying to tap in to her powers to orb herself out of her predicament. But my little serum is still suppressing her abilities. The more often she tries to orb, the more readings I get from her telling me how those powers are triggered. What are the physical changes that you three go through when you use your powers? That's what this is all about."

"But Paige knows she can't use her powers," Piper said.

"That's not stopping her from trying," Gnivik said. "Or you, either. How many times

have you tried to stop time to save your sisters since you were strapped into that chair? Or have you been attempting to blow me up? With every attempt, you give me more information I can use to perfect my formula and control all magic for good . . . or, well . . . for evil. You know what I mean."

Piper couldn't help but think that his insanity made a certain amount of sense. Of course, she had to hack her way through a lot of loony to get there, but his plan had merit. His experiments with the Charmed Ones could give him the results he wanted.

She didn't want to ask about Phoebe. It seemed pretty clear what the demon scientist intended to do with her.

"Oh, I see you've jumped ahead to your other sister," Gnivik said when he saw the look in her eyes. "Yes, I'm afraid any true research is going to need a proper exploration of the inner workings of the Charmed Ones. Get my hands dirty, so to speak," he added with a laugh. "Was that humor inappropriate? Didn't really cut the tension, did it? I have so much to learn." But the demon didn't sound like he was confused. He didn't even sound lighthearted. For the first time since meeting him, Piper saw the evil being as a real threat.

Piper closed her eyes, wishing that she were home.

Chapter 14

Halliwell Manor was beautiful, if not a little overwhelming in its emptiness. Now that it was finally clean, Nisha was able to fully appreciate the place. She knew she hadn't been expected to take on housekeeping duty, but there had been nothing else for her to do. She couldn't fix the damage that had happened to the place—like the hole in the kitchen floor—but she was able to get the burned demon out of the carpet. Besides, she enjoyed getting to know the place better as she went from room to room, fixing the devastation as best she could.

Nisha had heard a lot about the Charmed Ones while she was a student at Magic School. Her Modern Magic class even had a whole lesson plan based around the Warren Witches. Piper, Phoebe, and Paige were minor celebrities even before they'd started hanging around Magic School. To take even some small part in one of their adventures was more than enough

excitement for Nisha. The fact that it was little more than house-sitting was just fine. She wasn't big on danger. She would much prefer that it just stayed away.

With the infant versions of Wyatt and Chris still safely off at Magic School, Nisha had been left alone for over an hour with nothing to do but jump at every noise she heard. Once she was done cleaning, she tried passing the time watching television, since Magic School had none. She was immediately bored by the bland daytime programming and quickly tired of the people whining about what was wrong with their lives. Watching a woman receive her fifth round of paternity test results didn't have the same cliffhanger value of waiting for Leo and the boys to return from demon hunting.

Nisha clicked off the television set and scrounged around to see if there was anything to read in the house. Unfortunately, none of the books the sisters had lying around the living room sparked her interest, save one. And Nisha knew that it would be inappropriate for her to open up the famed Halliwell Book of Shadows. She wasn't even sure the book would allow her to open it in the first place. It was rumored to have safeguards to keep people away. Nisha didn't know if the defenses worked against just evildoers or all strangers, but she wasn't interested in finding out. She sat back on the couch, vigilant but bored, until she heard a knock at the front door.

Nisha froze at the noise. She considered ignoring it and letting whoever it was think that no one was home. Of course, if it was a demon looking to break in, the fact that no one answered the door would be a welcome invitation to make an attempt. *Then again, how many demons bother to knock at the door?* Nisha wondered.

The knocking came again. It sounded more insistent this time. It was certainly louder.

Nisha moved to the foyer, hoping that it was just aggressive Girl Scouts selling cookies, or some religious zealot passing out pamphlets. Honestly, considering that it was a mortal residential neighborhood, there were far more innocent options for who was on the other side. It was funny how Nisha's mind kept flipping to the worst-case scenario. She just knew that some demon was about to burst in and kill her.

The knocking came again.

Nisha braced herself as best she could from behind the door. The person—or being—wasn't going away. She was going to have to deal with it one way or another.

"Who's there?" she called out.

A man was peeking in through the colored glass. "It's Darryl. Who's that?"

"Darryl who?" she asked.

There was a pause before the response came. Nisha figured this "Darryl" was probably wondering who belonged to the unfamiliar voice coming through the door. That is, if "Darryl" was, in

fact, known to the Charmed Ones. She should have asked Leo to leave behind a list of approved people she could open the door to. She made a mental note to do that if she ever found herself house-sitting a magical manor in the future.

"Inspector Morris, SFPD," the man said. "I'm looking for Leo or the Halliwell sisters."

"I'd like to see some ID," Nisha said, still refusing to open the door.

A moment later, a badge and identification card were held up against the glass. Nisha couldn't really make out what they said through the door, so she opened it an inch, keeping her foot against the wood so he couldn't push his way inside. The man held up his wallet to her eye level. It looked official enough to Nisha, but she was still wary. She didn't interact with that many mortal police, living in the realm in which Magic School existed. How was she to know if his identification was genuine?

"Can I help you?" she asked, keeping her foot firmly behind the door.

"Yes, you can tell me where Leo is," Darryl said. "I'm a friend of the family. A neighbor reported hearing crashing noises from the house earlier. Neighbors report that a lot around here."

Nisha flushed. The crashing noises must have been from her botched attempt to protect the Manor from Leo and his sons earlier. She glanced back to the reconstructed grandfather

clock. "Sorry, we had a little accident. Nothing to worry about."

"Still, I'd like to come in and check things out," Darryl said.

Nisha considered the strange man at the door. He didn't look like an evil demon, not that she had a lot of experience in that area. Demon hunting was not really part of her resumé. Still, if he had wanted to come in, he could have just pushed his way past her by now. The fact that he was still standing there, waiting to be invited, was a good sign.

Unless he's a vampire, she thought. *They have to be formally invited inside. Or is that just on TV?*

Nisha decided to play it safe. She opened the door, but didn't formally tell him to come in. When Darryl crossed the threshold into the house, she marked "vampire" off her mental list of potential threats.

It was good timing, too. As Darryl stepped through the doorway, Nisha saw a strange woman storming her way up the steps to the Manor. Nisha wasn't sure if her senses were particularly heightened because she was on alert, but there was definitely something evil about that woman. It could have had something to do with the dagger in her hand.

Darryl must have seen the look on Nisha's face because he quickly turned toward the strange woman and raised his gun. "Drop the dagger," he said, taking in the situation way faster than Nisha had expected.

The woman paused about ten feet away from them and raised her arm as if she was about to throw the dagger.

Darryl tightened his grip on his weapon. "I said—" The blade was flying through the air before he could finish his warning. Without thinking, Nisha grabbed the back of the inspector's jacket and pulled him into the house. The dagger flew through the small space between them, dropping to the ground in the foyer. Nisha slammed and locked the door before the strange woman could get inside. It was doubtful that the lock was going to keep the woman out for long.

"I came for Leo," the woman screeched through the door.

"Friend of yours?" Darryl asked as he picked himself off the floor.

"Never seen her before in my life," Nisha said, backing away from the door.

"Care to tell me what's going on?" Darryl asked as the woman started banging on the door. "The abridged version."

"I'm not quite sure," Nisha said. She called out to the woman on the other side of the door. "I'm sorry. Leo's not home at the moment. Can I take a message?"

"That's okay," the woman said. "I'll be happy to wait for him if you let me in."

"You wouldn't happen to be named Xandra, would you?" Nisha asked.

The response came in the form of a blast out-

side the house. The door rattled on its hinges, but it held firm.

"I'll take that as a yes," Nisha mumbled.

Darryl leveled his gun at the door. "Got any suggestions?"

"Let me think." Nisha racked her brain trying to figure out a spell—any spell—that could help them in this situation. If only she could stop thinking of the many ways that Xandra was going to kill her and Darryl if she ever managed to get inside.

Another blast hit the door. A crack splintered the glass, but it did not break. Nisha didn't think that it was going to hold for long. She still couldn't come up with any kind of magic that would help them in this situation. Her expertise was in the area of healing herbs. She could come up with dozens of potions that could be of use, but nothing she could create in the time it would take the woman to get inside. Then there was the added problem of doing magic in front of this stranger. The last thing Leo would want is to return home with his secret exposed to the local police. Unless Darryl already knew . . .

"So, how do you know the girls?" Nisha asked as she braced herself against the door. It wasn't the safest route, but she thought that her physical presence working as a barricade might help delay the inevitable.

"It's a long story," Darryl said. Nisha's brow

furrowed. If he did know the truth about their magic, he probably didn't want to reveal anything to Nisha either. "You never did tell me your name, by the way," he added.

"Oh." She held out a hand. "I'm Nisha." They shook hands as another blast rocked the front door. Nisha felt it all the way through her bones and decided that acting as a human shield was a really dumb idea. She stepped away from the door.

"And how do you know them?" Darryl asked.

Nisha considered her answer carefully. "I'm a teacher . . . at the school . . . where Leo works."

"Magic School?"

"So, you know about Leo and the girls."

"More than I want to."

"Okay," she said with relief. The permission she had just given herself to use magic seemed to clear her mind. An idea had formed. It was more of a stopgap measure, but it might give her the time she needed. "Wait here!"

Nisha ran to the dining room. That was where she had stopped cleaning and, more importantly, it was where she had left the cleaning supplies. Nisha grabbed the broom and ran back to the foyer as another blast hit the door. The crack now ran from the top of the window to the bottom. Nisha wondered why Xandra didn't just throw something through the window at this point, but suspected that it

didn't have the same flair as using her magic.

Nisha tried to recall the words as she held the broom. It was an old spell she had learned as a child, but it was the only thing Nisha could think to do at the moment. She had said it so many times before bed when she was young that the words quickly flew into her head once again.

Protect us from the coming dark
With magic that provides a spark.
The evil lurking while we sleep,
I whisk away with a clean sweep.

"What are you doing?" Darryl asked.

"Basic protection spell," she said as she swept the broom toward the door. "As long as I sweep toward the door with an enchanted broom, she won't be able to come in, no matter how much she tries. My dad taught me the spell when I was a child and afraid of monsters attacking me in my sleep. I just hope it wasn't a story he told me to get me to go to bed."

"Well, considering how often monsters attack around here—"

"Not every witch's home is like living with the Charmed Ones," she explained. "I actually lived a fairly normal life. This is my first attack, come to think of it."

"Congratulations," Darryl deadpanned. "Now what?"

"You take the broom," she said, handing the

magical instrument to him. "I've got a potion to make."

Nisha left Darryl sweeping in the foyer and ran to the kitchen, grabbing everything she could from the herb cupboard. It wasn't enough. She was missing the key ingredient.

"Where the heck is the mandrake root?" she yelled in frustration.

She realized she was panicking. It was understandable, considering the Manor was under siege, but it wasn't helping. Nisha pulled a jar of lavender out of the cabinet, removed the lid, and inhaled deeply. She let the calming scent of the dried flower wash over her. It didn't rid her of her fears, but it helped her remember that they had left the mandrake root upstairs when Leo had cast his spell with the unicorn horn.

Nisha double-checked to make sure she had everything she needed, then dashed out of the kitchen. Darryl was still sweeping up by the front door. It seemed to be working. Nisha hadn't heard any more blasts, and the door had stopped looking like it was about to implode.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"Fine, I guess," Darryl said as he swept.

"I have to go to the attic," she said.

But before she could move, they both heard an explosion from the kitchen.

"The back door!" Nisha yelled

"I got it," Darryl said as he ran to the dining room and started sweeping so the witch couldn't

come any farther into the house. The door briefly swung toward him. Nisha saw a glimpse of Xandra before the door snapped back in her face. The witch let out a howl of pain and rage.

Guess the broom thing works, Nisha thought as she continued her dash for the attic. *Thanks, Dad.*

The mandrake root was right where she had left it. Nisha dropped the other ingredients beside the small cauldron. The remains of Leo's potion still sat in the bowl. Nisha looked for somewhere to dump the used potion, but couldn't find a sink or anything to pour it into. Seeing an open window, she decided that would be faster than going downstairs, and dumped the potion out into the garden below.

She put the cauldron back on the table and filled it with distilled water the girls kept in the upstairs cabinet for just such a purpose. Once the cauldron was half filled with water, Nisha began measuring out the herbs in her hand and adding them to the potion. Halfway through the potion-making, she heard a huge crash of glass come from below. She paused in the silence that followed, worried for Darryl. When she heard a pair of gunshots, she was jolted back into action. Darryl was fine for the moment, but he wouldn't be if she didn't finish the potion.

Nisha continued making the potion, trying to ignore the sounds of footsteps she heard speeding up the stairs toward her. She wanted to throw everything into the pot all at once, but she

knew that she had to measure the ingredients or else she was just making potpourri. The footsteps were getting closer as she added some periwinkle. She didn't even bother to look at the door as Darryl burst in.

"She came in through the conservatory," he said. "I couldn't stop her."

"Get behind me," Nisha commanded as she dropped the last ingredients into the potion. She almost scared herself by how firmly she had commanded him. Maybe she had a calling for this demon fighting.

I guess I'm about to find out, she thought as she grasped both sides of the cauldron.

Xandra was coming up the steps. She burst into the attic with her arms raised, chanting a spell. Nisha didn't give the witch time to finish. She threw the entire potion at her, drenching the woman. Xandra howled again as she froze solidly in place.

Nisha realized she was breathing heavily.

"That was great," Darryl said. "How long will she stay frozen like that?"

"A day, at least," Nisha said. "It's the equivalent of a magically induced coma so a body can properly heal. Makes a good freezing spell, too."

"Yes," Darryl said. "I'd have to agree."

They both looked at the witch, locked in a silent scream. Nisha was proud of herself . . . and a little bit exhausted, too.

Chapter 15

Leo stood at the metal double doors as they slowly opened. He wished that he had had more time to come up with a cover story, but Chris jumping the gun and knocking had pretty much quashed any prep time they'd had. Leo's mind raced through possible ways to explain who he was, but all that came to him was Chris's comment about electrical workers. At that point, it was too late. The doors were open, and a demon that looked a little bit like Cole was standing in the doorway, waiting for Leo to say something.

"Hi," Leo finally managed to say. "You're probably wondering—"

Chris stepped forward and decked the guy with a right uppercut, thus negating any need for a cover.

"See what I mean about the whole leaping before he looks?" Wyatt said.

"What?" Chris said innocently. "We can go in now."

Leo couldn't decide if he wanted to thank his son or admonish him for his rash behavior. True, there were times when rushing in was called for, but it was also a good idea to get the lay of the land beforehand. Then again, considering they were a step closer to finding Piper, Leo put all other concerns aside. "Good job, son," he said like the proud father he was. "Now help me with this guy."

The boys dragged the demon out into the cave while Leo searched the area. He only took one step inside the doorway before he stopped himself. There was a surveillance camera inside the entrance.

"Wyatt," he softly called to his son. "I need you when you're done there."

"Will do," his son replied.

Wyatt and Chris deposited the demon in a small alcove out of the sight lines of the exterior surveillance cameras. Once they had made it inside, Wyatt's glamours would wear off and whoever was watching the video feed would see their friend unconscious outside of the compound.

When Wyatt returned to the entrance, Leo pointed out the camera and told Wyatt to set up another glamour projecting the empty hall at the camera. Wyatt did as he was instructed, giving the three of them clear access to the building

without fear of being tracked. Once that was taken care of, Leo worked on the controls to the doors. The control pad on the wall seemed simple enough. A couple of flipped switches and the large metal doors moved back into place. They could hear the locking mechanism securing the double doors. They were safely inside . . . for the time being.

"Now where do we go?" Wyatt asked.

They looked down the long hall of the compound and saw an almost endless series of doors. Several side halls branched off from the main thoroughfare, probably with even more doors leading into dozens more rooms. Piper, Phoebe, and Paige could have been behind any one of them . . . or none at all. Leo was still working off information from a catnip-obsessed demon snitch. Not the most reliable of sources on the best day. For a moment, he worried that they may have broken into an innocent demon's lair in search of people who were not even in the area.

But, no. Leo could sense Piper's presence. She was in the building. It was only a matter of where.

"Door-to-door search?" Wyatt suggested.

"By the time we find Mom, we'll have alerted every demon in the vicinity," Chris said. "Besides, that could take forever. Do you see how many doors are in this place?

"There," Leo said, pointing to the ceiling.

"What?" Wyatt asked. Both his sons were looking up, but they clearly hadn't seen what he was looking at.

The video camera that was recording Wyatt's glamour of the empty hall had a cable sticking out of the back. It joined together with two other cables coming from the other side of the door. Together, the cables snaked along the wall, down the corridor, and into the first room on the right.

"That's going to lead us to the surveillance room." Leo said. "We can use the lab's own security system to find your mother for us."

"Now that sounds like a plan," Chris said as he started for the door.

Leo grabbed his son's shoulder. "Let me handle this one," he said.

Chris smiled and waved his father ahead. "After you."

Taking a page from his son's book, Leo stepped up to the door and knocked. He wasn't surprised to see the previous night's demon with the video camera opening the door for him. The demon, on the other hand, was quite shocked to see Leo at the door. Before the demon could respond, Leo raised his fist and took out all his frustration on the demon, dropping him with one punch.

At least now there was no question that they were in the right place.

"Go, Dad!" Wyatt said.

"Nice job," Chris added, patting Leo on the shoulder as he walked into the surveillance room.

Leo followed his sons into the small room. It was dark, with the only light coming from a wall of nine monitors that showed a variety of empty rooms. Most of the rooms looked like typical laboratories, while others seemed like they belonged in another place altogether. One of the top screens, for example, was focused on a nicely appointed bedroom that looked like it belonged in an old Victorian romance novel.

None of the rooms that were up on the monitors had anyone in them, least of all the Charmed Ones.

"Let me see if I can figure this out," Chris said as he took a seat by the controls for the monitors. He looked over the setup for a full minute before giving up and just randomly pressing buttons.

After a few false starts, the image on the monitor in the upper-right-hand corner switched to a different room. It was a huge cylindrical space with a man and a woman standing motionless at the two open entrances. At first, Leo thought the image was a still picture, considering how frozen they appeared. But the numbers running at the bottom of the screen indicated that the image was moving.

Chris pressed the button again, and the image switched to another empty lab.

"This is going to take forever," Wyatt said,

sliding in beside his brother. Between the two of them, they managed to get control of the entire top row of monitors. Now, two of the monitors showed hallways with random demons on patrol, while a third brought up a screen full of static.

"What's that?" Leo asked.

"I don't know," Wyatt replied as he looked down at the controls. "One of the cameras is offline. The one in Suite 24C. Should we check it out?"

"Make a note of it, but keep scrolling through the cameras," Leo said. "I don't want to waste time chasing down false leads."

"Noted," Wyatt said as he switched the monitor to the next image.

The boys continued to cycle through the different surveillance cameras while Leo kept a close watch on the screens. Image after image of empty rooms passed his eyes, just long enough for him to take in what he was seeing before his sons switched to the next room. He hadn't imagined that the place was so large. It was especially odd that a demon that he had never heard of had access to such a wealth of property in the Underworld. Either this demon was more powerful than they had anticipated, or—

"Stop!" Leo called out. "Go back one camera on the monitor on the right."

"That's mine," Chris said. He did as his father instructed. The image that Leo had just seen

came back up on the screen. The camera in that room was at an odd enough angle that most of the room was out of the shot, but there was one image there that he could see quite clearly.

His wife was sitting, bound to a chair, while the crazy demon in the lab coat stood over her.

"We need to find that room," Leo said. "Now."

Piper wished the demon would back off. He was well within her comfort zone and, quite frankly, personal hygiene was apparently not one of his higher priorities. "Why can't you just kill us and get it over with?" Piper asked.

"What would I learn from killing you?" Dr. Gnivik replied. "Except for how to kill you. Then you'd be dead, and the knowledge would no longer be applicable. This way I get to learn from you. *Then* I get to kill you."

Piper had now spent too much time with the lunatic, because his illogical logic was starting to make sense to her. Luckily, it looked like she wouldn't have to be around him much longer. Phoebe had managed to free her right arm. She was waving behind the demon's back to alert her sisters that she was almost out of her bonds.

Piper was trying to figure out a way to keep the demon occupied, when Paige—who couldn't see Phoebe was almost free—finally broke. "Can't . . . run . . . any . . . more!"

This drew the demon's attention across the

room, but he stopped when he saw Phoebe working at the straps on her left arm.

"Paige, hold on!" Piper warned.

"Oh, no you don't," the demon said as he moved toward Phoebe.

"Phoebe, above you!" Piper called out.

Phoebe twisted to see what Piper was talking about and saw the tray full of surgical instruments. She reached for a scalpel and threw it at the demon.

Dr. Gnivik dropped to the ground, and the scalpel sailed past him. By the time he was back up, Phoebe had another weapon in her hand. All Piper could do was watch as her sister threw blade after blade at the demon.

"Hey! Watch it!" Piper yelled. One of the scalpels had come precariously close to her head. It had embedded in the back of the chair, only inches from her face. From where Piper sat, she could see that it had been the last blade on the tray. Phoebe was weaponless.

Dr. Gnivik apparently saw that as well and made his move. Having two free hands, he was able to subdue Phoebe. She continued to struggle against him as he tried to strap her back down to the table.

Piper saw the distraction as an opportunity to make a move. She turned her head to the side and carefully grabbed the handle of the scalpel with her mouth. It took a few seconds for her to be able to work it out of the back of the chair.

Once it was free, she looked down at her side. Shifting her arm as far from the armrest as she could, Piper knew she only had one chance to get this right. A glance to see that Phoebe was still struggling with the demon gave Piper all the encouragement she needed.

Piper leaned as far forward as the straps would allow and dropped the scalpel from her mouth. It landed, blade down, and stuck in the armrest, only inches from her right hand. She twisted her hand around and grabbed the scalpel in the middle, a little too close to the blade. A small trickle of blood dripped from her pinkie. She ignored it as she set about cutting the strap binding her wrist to the arm of the chair.

"That's better," the demon said. "Feisty little one, aren't you?"

Piper looked up to see that the demon had succeeded in strapping Phoebe back down on the table, motivating Piper to double her effort. Within seconds, she had cut her way through the strap. Without a moment's pause, she started working on the left wrist before the demon noticed what she was doing. Luckily, he was too busy lording his power over Phoebe to bother with her.

Within seconds, Piper was free of her bonds. She looked around the room for a weapon, but there was nothing in the vicinity that was any better than the scalpel already in her hand. It would have to do. Paige looked like she was

about to collapse, and there was no telling what would happen to her if she did.

Piper silently approached the demon from behind, careful not to step on any of the instruments Phoebe had thrown and give away her position. She picked up a second scalpel and hid it up her left sleeve. It didn't hurt to have extra weapons, considering she had no magical powers at the moment. She continued toward him. Even though she was being especially careful not to make a sound, she couldn't do anything about her reflection in the silver lamp that was hanging over the exam table.

The demon spun around the moment he saw her image approaching. Piper lunged for Gnivik, but he managed to dive out of the way and came up holding a saw that had fallen from the tray when Phoebe had reached for weapons. The blade on his saw was five times the size of Piper's small scalpel. This was a knife fight she knew she couldn't win.

"Okay," she said, putting her free hand up in the air as if she were surrendering. "I give up. I'm not about to even try to take you on." She made a show of dropping the scalpel on the ground while she carefully slid the other scalpel out of her sleeve and onto the table beside Phoebe so her sister could begin working on the strap that bound her left hand.

Dr. Gnivik pointed with his saw. "Get back in your chair."

"Okay," Piper said. "I will move over there now." She figured that Phoebe would get the message, and she did.

Piper took several steps away from the table, making sure that Gnivik's attention was on her the entire time. But, instead of moving toward the chair, Piper moved further into the room.

"I said the chair," he repeated.

"I know, I know," Piper said. "So you can do your experiment, then kill us. Gotcha. But first, I'd like to know more about how these things work. This treadmill machine, for example." Piper moved swiftly over to Paige, successfully causing Gnivik to turn his back on Phoebe. Piper could see that her sister wasn't wasting any time. She was hacking away at her bonds again. "How does this work, exactly?"

"My benefactor was right," Dr. Gnivik said. His magnified eyes were filled with rage, and his hair seemed to be sticking up higher than ever. "No more stalling. We're finishing this right now!"

"Benefactor?" Piper wondered aloud. She felt a sudden sense of dread—even more so than the one she had been feeling since regaining consciousness hours ago. There was no doubt in her mind who this mysterious benefactor was.

Piper pushed her suspicions to the back of her mind. She didn't have the time to ask anything more about it as the demon scientist charged at her. Piper dodged his lunge, pushing

him past her so that he slammed his head into the force field around Paige.

"Someone stop this crazy thing!" Paige screamed, using what looked to be the last of the air in her lungs.

"I'm trying!" Piper called to her sister as she tried to figure out the controls beside the large piece of equipment. She was so focused on the task that she didn't notice the demon was getting back on his feet. "I think I got it!"

Piper pressed a series of buttons, causing the treadmill to finally slow. The invisible field flashed bright blue, then disappeared. Piper reached out a hand and grabbed Paige by the arm. "It's over."

Relief washed over Paige as she hopped off the treadmill. Her legs were so weak that she immediately collapsed onto the floor. Piper tried to help her sister up, but felt a pair of hands around her own neck. She let go of Paige to fight off Gnivik, who was crushing her throat.

Piper struggled against the demon, who was surprisingly more powerful than he looked. She wished that she had her powers back, as she had never before wanted to blow up anyone as badly as now. Paige was still on the ground, only semiconscious. She wasn't going to be any help. Piper would have to rely on her own strength. If only she could get a better grip on the demon's hands, maybe she could force him to let go.

Or better yet . . .

Piper raised her hands to her neck, grabbing on to the demon's hands with her nails. She squeezed tightly, drawing blood and causing him to scream in anguish. But Piper refused to let go. She just bore down until he finally released her.

Before Piper could turn to face him, she heard a clanging sound behind her. Then she saw the mad scientist fall at her feet. Phoebe stepped over him to stand beside her sister. She was holding the metal tray that the surgical instruments had been on.

"Good job," Piper said.

"Thank you."

Piper grabbed the demon by the arm. "Help me with this."

"Gladly," Phoebe said, taking the other arm.

Together they dragged him past their sister and dropped him on the treadmill. Piper went over to the control panel and put the force field back up. "Oh, Dr. Gnivik," she said.

The demon slowly regained consciousness. When he reached out to grab her, his hand slammed into the invisible wall. As far as Piper was concerned, the look on his face when he realized he was caught in his own experiment almost made everything worth it.

Almost.

Piper pressed the button to start up the treadmill and laughed as Gnivik was forced to run his own experiment as the lab rat. The

demon looked pathetic caught in his own trap.

"I wonder what happens if I press all the buttons?" Piper said as she eyed the control panel. Then she did just that.

The treadmill rolled on at an incredible rate of speed. The demon was flailing inside the force field as he tried to keep up. His hair was flying in all directions. His glasses dropped onto the treadmill, flew backward, and smashed into the force field, shattering. Soon, it was just physically impossible for the demon to maintain the pace. He dropped to the ground and followed the same trajectory as his glasses. When the demon slammed into the invisible barrier, he burst into flames.

Piper shook her head with regret. "Let's get out of here," she said.

Piper and Phoebe each took one of Paige's arms and helped her up. She could walk, but her legs were still weak from the forced run. That slowed them a bit, but not too much.

"We need to find the other lab," Piper said. "Destroy the serum that suppressed our powers. It's too dangerous to leave here." They stepped into the hall to find a huge row of doors leading off in both directions. "Well, this isn't good."

"What?" Paige asked in exhaustion. "What isn't good?" She looked up and saw the doors. "Oh."

"Talk about a needle in a haystack," Piper said. "How are we ever going to find the right lab?"

"If we see a room that looks like it belongs in

an old English manor, there's a portal in the fireplace that will take us to the lab," Phoebe said.

"And deposit us in the locked cage."

Phoebe held up the demon's key chain. "Took this off Gnivik after I clocked him with the tray."

"Good job, Phoebes."

"Yes," a voice said from behind them. "Good job, all of you."

The voice sent a chill up Piper's spine. It must have been Gnivik's mysterious benefactor. Unfortunately, it was a voice she recognized all too well.

"Zankou."

Chapter 16

Piper stared at the most powerful demon in the Underworld, whose presence she had just announced, trying to hide her fear. He was leaning against the door frame of one of the many rooms in the hall behind her, looking like he was hanging out on a relaxing afternoon. The plaque on the wall indicated that it was Suite 24C. Piper couldn't see past him into the room, but she was pretty sure that she didn't want to know what was in there. There was no way she and her sisters could take him on without their powers. Especially with Paige half out of it as it was. Their best bet was to rely on the old standby plan: stall.

"Do you have your hands in, like, everything that goes on in the Underworld?" Piper asked. She looked back to the lab, wondering if she and her sisters could make it back there safely before Zankou attacked. Not that she knew what she would do once she was inside.

"What can I say? I like to dabble," Zankou said with a smirk. "Did you really think a demon geek like Gnivik could hold dominion over all the demons we sent to attack you last night?"

"Yeah, I was kind of wondering about that," Phoebe said.

"So, what's the plan now?" Piper asked. "You want to run some experiments on us too?"

"No, we tried that route already," Zankou said lightly. "Didn't quite get the results we were hoping for. Now I think we'll just go with Plan B: killing you."

"Have to say that Plan A was much more original," Paige mumbled weakly.

"Always with a sense of humor up to the end," Zankou noted.

"Yeah," Piper said. "Someone should do a study on it."

"Maybe someday," Zankou said, stepping out of the doorway. "But not today."

A flood of demons rushed out into the hall from Suite 24C. Frankly, Piper thought it was overkill, considering they didn't have their powers. It looked like Zankou was leaving nothing to chance this time. He was going to see that they died, and there was nothing the Charmed Ones could do about it.

The demons lined the hall like a firing squad, raising their arms as their weapons of choice.

"Can we talk about this?" Phoebe asked.

"Talking was Gnivik's thing," Zankou said. "I like to think of myself as a man of action."

"*Demon* of action," Piper corrected.

"Whatever," he said, waving her off. "Any last words?"

"Leo," Piper said.

Zankou smiled. "Oh, that's sweet. Thinking of your love in your final moments. I'll be sure to let him know that his name was the last word on your lips."

"He already does," Leo said from behind the demons. "Although I do have to argue with that whole part about it being her last words."

Piper was never happier to see her husband than she was at that moment. She couldn't figure out what her grown sons were doing with him, but she didn't really care. They were powerful witches. And they looked about ready to come unleashed. Wyatt and Chris flanked Leo and grabbed his arms, then orbed over to the rest of their family.

"Are you okay?" Leo asked Piper.

"Good enough," she said.

"What a touching reunion," Zankou said. "Just in time for you all to die together." He looked to his demon soldiers. "Fire!"

Energy pulses shot out of the demons' hands toward the Charmed Ones and their family. Before Piper could react, Wyatt threw up a hand and a blue force field appeared in front of them. Piper recognized it as the same

bubble that protected infant Wyatt. She assumed that her son learned to control it as he grew older. She couldn't help but think that a personal force field would come in handy in her line of work.

"Not that I'm complaining," she said, "but what are the boys doing here?"

"Later," Leo said. "First we've got to get out of this place."

"Actually, no," Piper said. "First we've got to find a lab and destroy a very dangerous serum."

"Piper, there are, like, a thousand labs in this place," Leo said. "I saw them on the surveillance monitors. How are we supposed to find the right one?"

"Phoebe said something about a room in an English manor," Piper suggested.

"I saw that on one of the monitors," Leo said. "Very Victorian looking."

"Can we speed this up?" Wyatt asked. "My shield is getting weaker."

Piper saw that the blue barrier was starting to blink out under the demons' continued attack.

"Any idea where the room is?"

"No," Leo said. "Chris, can you take us back to the surveillance room?"

"I'm losing it," Wyatt warned.

"No time," Chris said as he tried to bolster his brother's power. "I'll have to send you there without me."

"Do it," Leo said.

Phoebe grabbed him. "Wait! You'll need this." She handed Piper the set of keys.

In the same moment that Wyatt's shield failed, Chris sent his parents away.

Piper and Leo were transported to the other side of the compound, where they reappeared inside a small, dark room with a wall full of monitors. Though she knew that she had a task to do, Piper couldn't stop worrying about her sons and her sisters. She tried to lock the concern away and focus on the goal. She was so focused on what they were doing that she didn't even think to ask about the unconscious demon splayed out on the floor.

"I saw that room on this monitor," Leo said, pointing to a screen on the top row. He moved behind the console to work the controls.

Lab after lab passed on-screen. They all looked the same to Piper, except for the one domed room that had two demons oddly standing guard and not moving, even though a battle was raging in another part of the building. That screen blinked out just as quickly as it had come on, replaced by yet another laboratory. There was no way Piper would be able to tell which lab held the serum. They all looked the same. The point became moot when the English/Victorian manor room came up on the monitor.

Leo read the location on the screen. "18J." He mapped it out on the console. "It's not that far from here."

"Let's go," Piper said, holding tightly to the keys.

The couple carefully exited the surveillance room, glad to see that there weren't any demons in the vicinity beyond the unconscious one they were leaving behind. Piper followed her husband through several twists and turns in the multiple hallways until they reached Suite 18J. Thankfully, the door was unlocked, so they didn't have to go searching through the keys for the right one.

"Wow," Piper said as she took in the room. "This is nice."

"Maybe once this is over we can make a reservation for a romantic weekend here," Leo suggested with smile. "Just the two of us."

Piper smiled back. It was nice to be able to take a moment to enjoy the fact that they were together again.

"Maybe not," they said in unison.

The moment was over.

Piper moved to the fireplace. "Phoebe said there's some kind of portal in here."

"Was she sure?" Leo asked. "'Cause my clothing is flammable. I am, too."

"Come on," she said, taking his hand. "We'll walk through the fire together."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," he said as they stepped into the flames and were teleported to the lab.

They appeared in the middle of the cage Piper

was already quite familiar with. She didn't even pause for a second as she went for the lock. After about a half-dozen keys, she found the one that fit. She felt an immense amount of satisfaction as the lock turned and the door to the cage opened.

"After me," she said as she stepped out of the cage.

The distillery apparatus looked exactly as it had when Piper last saw it. The test tubes full of the Charmed Ones' blood were now almost empty, while the beaker at the end of the collection of glass-and-metal tubing was nearly filled to the rim with the purple liquid. Piper wasted no time taking the three test tubes out of the contraption and smashing them on the floor. She hesitated, though, when she lifted the beaker.

"What is it?" Leo asked.

"This stuff," she said. "It can take away my powers. Make me fully mortal, like you."

"That is some powerful stuff," Leo said.

"Well, not like this," she said. "It only lasts a few hours. But maybe it could lead to a . . ."

Leo filled in the blank for her. "Cure? You know, being a witch isn't a disease. It's part of who you are."

"Being a Whitelighter was part of who you were," she countered.

"No, I was a mortal in the beginning," he said, "and I'll be a mortal at the end."

Piper looked at the serum. "It would make life so much easier."

"Until the next demon comes along and you can't do anything about it," Leo reminded her. "Trust me, I know what I'm talking about. Look, I don't know what the future holds for us, but I've got some good ideas. Magic got us where we are today. It's always going to play a part in our lives. We just need to accept what we can do and what we can't do and just live."

Piper ran her fingers along her husband's jawline. "I love you."

"I love you, too," he said, pulling her into his arms and giving her a kiss.

For the first time all day, Piper felt totally safe.

When the kiss ended, Piper took one last look at the beaker in her hand, then walked over to the sink and poured the contents down the drain.

"Better?" Leo asked.

"Not quite yet," she said as she moved over to the metal-and-glass distillery. She placed both her hands against the metal bar in the center of the contraption and gave it a good shove. The glass-and-metal apparatus tipped over and fell to the ground with a resounding crash.

"Come on," Leo said once the debris settled. "Let's go find our family."

Chapter 17

Piper was glad to be home. She was so glad to be back that she didn't even question why half the windows in the conservatory were smashed in. She was too busy looking for her sons. The younger versions of her sons, that is. The elder Wyatt and Chis had orbed their family home. But Piper hadn't seen their infant selves in over twenty-four hours and she was missing her babies.

"Welcome back," Nisha Maksoud said as she hopped off the wicker couch next to the empty playpen.

"Nisha, what are you doing here?" Paige asked. She sounded much more lively now that most of her energy had finally come back.

"She helped out," Leo said. "I couldn't have done this without her. Although I'm wondering what happened to the conservatory while we were gone."

"Long story," Nisha said. "By the way, your

friend Darryl stopped by. Someone should give him a call. Let him know you're all right. You are all alright, right?"

"Am I still tired, or is she speaking in tongue twisters?" Paige asked, taking a seat.

"We're fine," Leo said. "The demon menace has been vanquished."

"But Zankou got away," Chris said.

"Actually, we let him get away," Wyatt corrected.

"Yeah, I still don't get that," Phoebe said. "Why didn't you vanquish him when you had the chance?"

"Zankou still has an important part to play in the time line," Wyatt explained.

"Don't worry," Chris added. "You'll find out what he's talking about soon enough."

"That's enough hinting about the future," Leo said. "We need to get you boys back to your time."

"And get my babies back, too," Piper added.

"Oh, I'll take care of that," Nisha responded with a little too much excitement than the tired group was ready for. She bounded upstairs for the portal to Magic School.

"She certainly is a sprightly one," Phoebe said.

Piper was glad that the young woman was so full of energy. It meant her children would be back in her arms even sooner. Of course, that reminded her that it was time to say good-bye to

the elder versions of her sons. Even though she knew she'd be spending the rest of her life watching her sons grow, there was still something sad about when they left her. Then again, she had already interacted with her adult sons far more than any woman her age would have.

"I guess it's time to go," Chris said, reading his mother's mind.

"What's the rush?" Phoebe said. "Stick around a while. Stay for dinner. I'm starving."

Piper was starving, too. They hadn't eaten anything since the day before. She wondered what had happened to the Chinese food that Leo had gone out for. But Piper knew that the longer her sons stuck around, the harder it would be for her to say good-bye.

"We really can't," Wyatt said for the boys. "We were in the middle of a demon battle when Dad called us. We should really get back."

Since they were dealing with time travel, Piper knew there was no need for them to rush, but she figured Wyatt was looking for a graceful way out. It must have been hard on the boys to come back in time. The few times she had traveled into her past had been a difficult emotional journey for her as well.

Piper wrapped both of her sons up in a big hug and said her good-byes. The rest of the family followed suit. As touching as the departure was, the sadness was tempered by the fact

that there was a set of each family member in both time periods, so it wasn't like any of them were saying good-bye for long.

"Okay, so how do they get back?" Paige asked the obvious.

Leo pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. "I rewrote your spell from the Book of Shadows. But I'm out of magic."

"I'll do it," Piper said, holding out her hand. Leo gave her the spell. She took one last look at her grown young men and then read what her husband had written:

Sons in the future, come to the past,
Seeing anew what once has passed,
Return them now to whence they came,
Back when they left, all now the same.

Piper looked back up in time to watch her sons disappear. But she hardly had the chance to miss them as Nisha came back down the stairs with baby Chris nestled in her arm and holding little Wyatt's hand.

"My boys," Piper said as she hurried over to them and picked Wyatt up before he even reached the bottom step. Leo took Chris out of Nisha's arms and held the boy beside his mother. "Mommy missed you both so much."

"I guess my work here is done," Nisha said. "It's been . . . fun? Is that okay to say in this kind

of situation? I mean, it wasn't *really* fun, but it was more exciting than watching grass grow. Well, unless it's Peruvian Beltane grass. That stuff shoots right up, and . . . I'm babbling, aren't I?"

"Just a bit," Leo said with a laugh.

"Come on," Paige said, throwing an arm around Nisha's shoulder. "I'll walk you out."

Phoebe looked at Piper and Leo. "I'll come, too," she said as she followed the girls upstairs.

"Do me a favor," Leo said.

"Anything," Piper replied as they sat with their children.

"Never disappear on me again. I really didn't like it."

"I promise," Piper said. "Now will you do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Can you go pick up some more Chinese food? I'm starving."

They both shared a laugh as Leo pulled her into his arms. Piper was so enjoying being with her family that she put off thoughts of food for a while. She didn't want Leo to move from that spot.

They were still enjoying their family togetherness when Paige and Phoebe came back downstairs.

"Well, Nisha's back at Magic School," Paige said. "But there's something we didn't have a

chance to ask her before she left. We were kind of hoping you knew the answer, Leo."

"What is it?" he asked.

"Why is there a frozen woman in our attic?"

About the Author

Paul Ruditis has written and contributed to a variety of books based on such notable TV series as *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Star Trek*, *The West Wing*, and *Prison Break*. This is his third Charmed novel, in addition to being a coauthor on both volumes of *The Book of Three*, the official episode guide for the series. Paul is currently working on his original teen book series, Drama!

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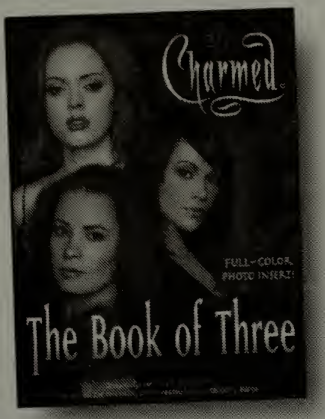

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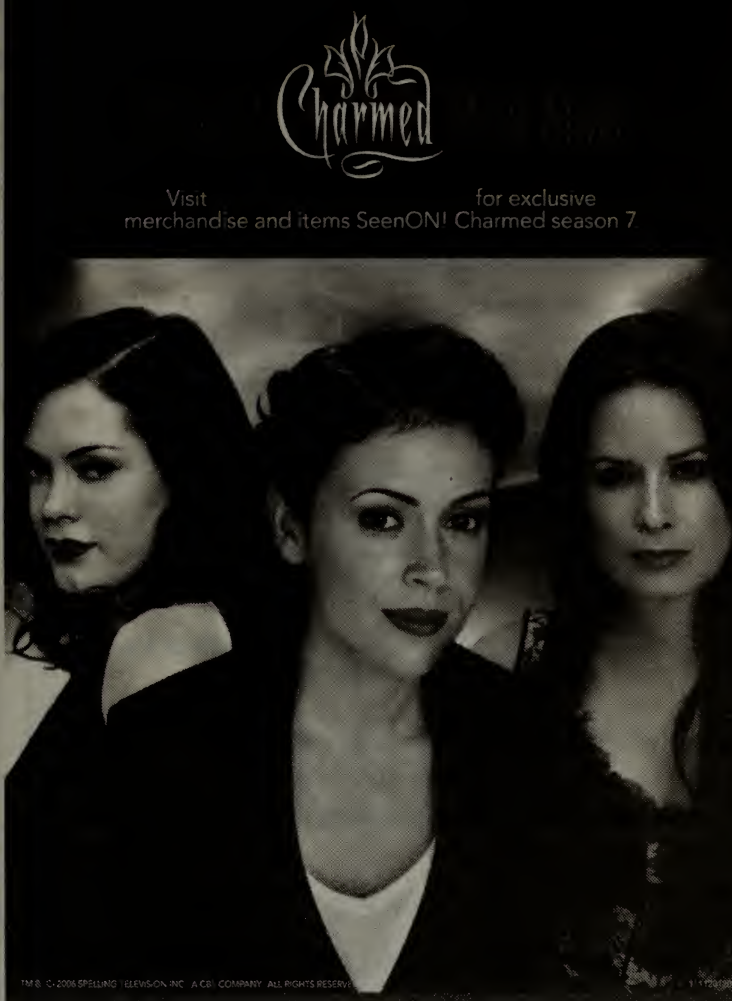
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While a newly mortal Leo is out for a walk with Wyatt and newborn Chris, demons trap the Charmed Ones in the house and take them to the Underworld, where they are imprisoned by demon scientist Dr. Gnivik, who plans to steal the Power of Three. When Leo returns to find the house empty and in even more disarray than when he left, he tries to piece together what happened, but can't. Due to his recent fall from grace, the Elders ignore his calls. What is he to do? With no other options—and no magic of his own—Leo becomes desperate.

Using a spell from the Book of Shadows, his sons' magic, and a sliver of unicorn horn, he calls the future versions of Wyatt and Chris back to the present. Together, the Halliwell men go in search of The Charmed Ones. With Dr. Gnivik nearing success and the sisters powerless to stop him, it's up to Leo and the boys to save the day. . . .

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